



Reflective EFL Education in Iran: Existing Situation and Teachers' Perceived Fundamental Challenges

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: 18 May. 2018

Received in revised form: 3 Aug. 2018

Accepted: 12 Sept. 2018

DOI: 10.14689/ejer.2018.77.7

Keywords

reflective teaching, current status, EFL teachers, challenging obstacles

ABSTRACT

Purpose: The significance of reflective teaching has been widely underscored in the literature. A primary consideration concerning the actualization of teacher reflection is seeking existing challenges to the approach and planning to handle them. This study sought to explore the current status of reflective teaching among Iranian EFL teachers and their perception of fundamental challenges to teacher reflection. **Methods:** Adopting a mixed-method approach, this study took advantage of questionnaire and open-ended survey. The data were collected from 176 high school teachers. To indicate whether any significant discrepancy existed between the expected and observed behaviours, chi-square goodness-of-fit test was run at item level. Concerning

the data collected through the open-ended survey, the recurrent themes were identified, and the major categories of challenges, subcategories, and their frequency of being mentioned were extracted. **Findings:** The results of chi-square goodness-of-fit test were statistically significant in 28 items out of 29, that is, there were significant discrepancies between the expected and observed behaviours in case of 28 dimensions of teacher reflection included in the instrument. Following the thematic analysis, five main categories of obstacles were extracted, including the obstacles relevant to teachers, students, educational system (macro and micro level), political system, and parents. In terms of frequency, the categories of educational system and teacher-relevant obstacles were the first and second most frequently mentioned categories. **Implications for Research and Practice:** Indicating an inappropriate situation, the results implied the necessity for change in teacher education programs and highlighted the role of the Ministry of Education in facilitating teacher reflection.

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Introduction

Over the years, numerous researchers and scholars have emphasized the importance of reflective teaching and referred to the pedagogical benefits of applying its principles in instruction (Bailey, 1997; Bolton, 2010; Farrell, 1998; Sowa, 2009). Reflective teaching became prominent in EFL education as the method-centred approach lost its acceptability. During the method era, EFL teachers were expected to passively follow the methods. Theorists and experts were regarded as the qualified agents for producing knowledge, and the mere role of teacher was channelling content knowledge from expert to learner without any noticeable share in altering the content according to contextual considerations (Crandall, 2000; Kumaravadivelu, 2003). In the twentieth century, a stream of criticism against the notion of method arose, and some scholars persuasively questioned the acceptability of the method-centred approach toward teaching (Allwright, 1991; Pennycook, 1989; Stern, 1992). The fall of method was accompanied by the rise of postmethod, and postmethod was associated with new orientations toward teacher and teaching. Reflective teaching evolved and found more voice in language education as a result of postmethod debate (Akbari, 2007; Prabhu, 1990). Originated from Dewey's views, the concept of reflective teaching entered the realm of EFL teaching from general education. The approach considered an influential position for teachers. According to it, not being treated as apprentices assigned to execute scholars' good-for-all prescriptions (Kumaravadivelu, 2003), teachers were supposed to be involved actively in the process of self-observation and self-evaluation. Teacher reflectivity highlighted the role of teachers as those who were allowed to adjust the educational content according to context, reflect upon and analyse their classroom events, and solve classroom dilemmas accordingly. They were encouraged to take advantage of observation, journal keeping, video/audio recording, peer suggestions, learner views, as well as relevant books and articles to promote their teaching effectiveness.

The foundation of reflective teaching approach was established by prominent scholars such as Dewey (1933), Schön (1983), Gore and Zeichner (1991); Jay and Johnson (2002), and Freeman and Richards (1993). Meanwhile, its components have been expanded over time by subsequent theorists. Dewey (1933) described reflective teachers as those who have "the ability to look back critically and imaginatively, to do cause-effect thinking, to derive explanatory principles, to do task analysis, also to look forward, and to do anticipatory planning" (p. 13). Schön took a step further. Referring to the efficiency of teachers' reflective acts in comparison to experts' top-down prescriptions, he (1983) distinguished practical reflective processes, called reflective-in-action and reflective-on-action. Reflection-in-action referred to teachers' reflective attempts to solve unexpected problems that occur during teaching based upon their experience. Reflection-on-action, on the other hand, referred to teachers' reflective acts to plan their teaching and evaluate its efficiency afterwards. Bartlett (1990) considered reflection as transcending the technicalities of teaching and thinking beyond the need to promote instructional techniques. He highlighted the necessity of teachers' movement from "how to" questions to "what" and "why" ones to establish control over their actions and create "the possibility of transforming their everyday classroom

life" (p. 205). In a similar vein, Kumaravadivelu (2003) defined reflective teaching with regard to teacher's self-directed evaluation, action research, and contextual specificities. He viewed reflective teachers as teachers who collect information about what occurs in their classrooms, spot problems, and conduct action research to solve classroom dilemmas.

The assumed role for reflective teachers significantly evolved when EFL education, in line with other disciplines, took on a critical flavour. Inspired by Freire's (1972) ideas on the emancipatory potential of education (Kumaravadivelu, 2003), ideological concerns became the centre of attention. Critical pedagogists (e.g., Giroux, 1988; Pennycook, 1989; Simon, 1984, 1987) warned against the role of education in sustaining unequal power relations. Adopting a critical perspective, language was recognized as ideology, not merely a system, and EFL education was believed to involve social, cultural, and political issues, rather than merely linguistic information (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Critical pedagogists regarded schools as "cultural arenas where heterogeneous ideological, discursive, and social forms collide in an unremitting struggle for dominance" (McLaren, 1995, p. 30).

So far, a brief history on the development of the concept of reflective teaching was presented. It is noteworthy that reflective teaching has been affected by various trends, and there does not exist quite rough consensus among scholars about its components (Akbari, Behzadpour, & Dadvand, 2010). For the purpose of this study, the construct is defined based upon the framework presented by Akbari et al. (2010). In an attempt to develop and validate a reflective teaching instrument, they proposed a five-factor model of teacher reflection. The components included practical, affective, cognitive, metacognitive, and critical elements. The practical component dealt with teachers' use of reflective tools and procedures, such as journal writing, audio/video recordings, observation, and group discussions. The cognitive component involved teachers' attempts for professional growth through conducting action research, participating in conferences, and reading relevant books and journals. The affective (learner) component was concerned with teachers' reflection on learners' affective, cultural, and cognitive states. The metacognitive component dealt with teachers' own view of teaching, their personality, beliefs, and emotional states. Finally, the critical component was concerned with teachers' consideration of sociopolitical aspects of teaching and their attempts to raise learners' awareness.

The significance of reflective teaching in teacher education programs and the need to equip teachers with reflective skills have been widely underscored in ELT literature (Brandt, 2008; Farrell, 2008; Johnson, 2006; Wallace, 1991). Crandall (2000) warns against the danger of educating teachers in the light of prescriptivism and suggesting cookbook-like instructions for effective teaching. Highlighting that decontextualized theories do not match the multidimensionality and unpredictability of classroom setting, she refers to teacher inquiry and reflection as important devices for the "development of language teaching theory and appropriate language teacher education" (p. 40). Implying the beneficial nature of teacher reflection, Farrell's (2016) study indicated how reflective practice can help novice teachers cope with the complexities they experienced at the beginning of teaching. The participants of his

study were three novice ESL teachers who had started teaching in a university in Canada. They formed a teacher reflection group and reflected on their teaching with Farrell as the facilitator for one semester. The reflection group was found to noticeably help teachers overcome many of the shocks they experienced in their first year of teaching. Verifying the positive effect of teacher reflection on student outcome, several studies have been conducted in recent years. In 2007, Taghilou explored the issue with two homogeneous groups of Iranian pre-university students as participants. The experimental and control group were taught the same materials by two reflective and non-reflective teachers. After 14 weeks, a standard achievement test was administered to both groups to compare their language abilities. The results revealed significantly higher scores and more student satisfaction and support in the experimental group.

Additionally, in 2008, Akbari, Kiany, Naeeni, and Allvar, as a part of their study examined the relationship between teachers' degree of reflectivity and student achievement outcome. Thirty EFL teachers' performances on a teacher reflectivity instrument were matched against their students' final scores as a measure of their achievement. The results indicated a high correlation between teacher reflectivity and student achievement outcomes. Concerning the relationship between EFL teachers' reflective practice and self-efficacy, Baleghizadeh and Javidanmehr (2014) conducted a study with 120 EFL teachers and found a significant relationship between the two constructs. Seeking how well the six components of reflective teaching predicted teacher efficacy, the results of their study revealed that the six-predictor model was statistically significant and accounted for 39% of the variance of teacher efficacy. In fact, recent studies imply the advantageous nature of reflective teaching.

It is noteworthy that besides considering the benefits of reflective teaching and its position in postmethod, a crucial issue which requires special attention is the existence of potential challenges to the trend. As Kumaravadivelu (2006) states, there exist challenging barriers, including pedagogical and ideological ones. The pedagogical barriers deal with the transmission model of EFL teacher education, and the ideological ones are the barriers manipulated by political, economic, and cultural forces sustaining unequal power relations and marginalization. In a similar vein, Akbari (2008a) refers to strict administrative frameworks, the need to highly qualified teachers, as well as social, political, and economic obstacles. Besides predicting the obstacles theoretically, there is a need to probe the existing challenges in practical terms. Reviewing the literature, one finds that quite recently a few studies have been conducted in this regard. Concentrating on the context of private language institutes, Soodmand Afshar and Farahani (2017) made an attempt to investigate EFL teachers' perception of inhibitors to reflective practice. The results of their study revealed that lack of knowledge, teaching situation, and affective-emotional inhibitors were three types of barriers mainly reported by private institute teachers. In another study, Moradkhani and Shirazizadeh (2017), as a part of their research, interviewed ten teachers (five private institute teachers and five state school teachers) to explore factors affecting their reflective practice. The findings of this small-scale study were indicative of five main factors, including knowledge of reflection, institutional demands, teachers' attitude toward teaching, availability of resources, and collegial support.

Having reviewed recent studies on challenges to teachers' reflective practice, some gap is felt concerning the educational context of state schools. State schools generally hold a special position. They address huge numbers of students and provide free education. It is of supreme importance that they do not fall behind currently acceptable trends in language teaching. Gaining insight into the existing challenges and obstacles to state school teachers' reflective practice paves the way for boosting the situation and mitigating educational shortcomings. Taking account of the pedagogical benefits of reflective teaching and the dearth of large-scale systematic research on challenges to state school teachers' reflective practice, this study sought to address the following research questions:

1. Taking account of different dimensions of reflective teaching, is there any significant difference between the expected and observed behaviours of Iranian EFL teachers teaching at state high schools?
2. What are fundamental challenges to the actualization of reflective teaching in Iranian state high schools according to EFL teachers?

Method

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-method approach. It took advantage of both qualitative and quantitative data, and the instruments were determined accordingly.

Research Sample

The participants of this study included 176 EFL teachers, who taught at Iranian state high schools. They were selected through convenience sampling from five provinces of Iran, including Fars, Ilam, Kermanshah, Chaharmahal va Bakhtiari, and Isfahan. The sample consisted of 97 males and 79 females, within the age range of 26 to 66 years old. The participants' teaching experience ranged from 2 to 42 years, with a central tendency of 21. They held various degrees of A.D., B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. 94 of them were B.A. holders, 56 teachers had M.A. degree, and respectively 18 and 8 of them held A.D. and Ph.D. degrees.

Research Instruments and Procedures

In order to investigate the status of reflective teaching among the participants, Reflective Teaching Instrument (Akbari et al., 2010) was applied. This instrument is a 29-item questionnaire, and encompasses five components, including practical, cognitive, affective, metacognitive, and critical components. It is designed based upon a five-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "always". Concerning the reliability of the instrument, Cronbach's alpha estimate proved to be .94, which indicate very good internal consistency. In the next stage in order to explore the participants' perception of the existing challenges to reflective teaching, a survey was designed. The primary version of the survey was evaluated and judged by two experts in applied linguistics, and the final version was prepared after making some modifications based

upon their comments. The survey was comprised of open-ended questions, seeking teachers' views and elaborations on fundamental challenges to reflection in their teaching context. In order to distribute the instruments, both face-to-face and email methods were applied. The instruments were distributed to a total of 238 EFL teachers; 176 of them completed and returned the instruments to the researchers.

Data Analysis

The data collected through the Reflective Teaching Instrument were fed into SPSS 19. To indicate whether any significant difference (discrepancy) existed between the expected and observed behaviours, a chi-square goodness-of-fit test was run at item level. Concerning the data collected through the open-ended survey, the recurrent themes were identified by thematic analysis following the principles established by Braun and Clarke (2006). To do so, the responses were read, re-read, and then coded attending to repeated meanings and themes. The major categories of mentioned challenges, subcategories, and their frequency of being mentioned were extracted.

Results

In order to gain insight into the status of reflective teaching among the participants, descriptive statistics and chi-square goodness-of-fit test were employed to analyse the collected data. The results of the descriptive statistics are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for EFL Teachers' Reflection

Participants	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
EFL teachers	176	37	131	86.937	20.337	-.345	-.245

The total mean score of the sample proved to be 86.94 ($SD= 20.34$). The minimum and maximum scores of the EFL teachers were 37 and 131, and the distribution was negatively skewed.

In order to perform a more detailed analysis, chi-square tests were run at item level. The results are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2
Chi-Square Test for EFL Teachers' Reflection

Items	Teacher reflection	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	χ^2	df	Asymp. sig.
1	Journal keeping for reviewing purposes	44.9%	25.0%	17.0%	9.1%	4.0%	90.534 ^a	4	.000
2	Seeking colleagues' feedback	6.8%	15.3%	37.5%	28.4%	11.9%	56.102 ^a	4	.000
3	Reflection after each lesson	19.9%	34.7%	33.5%	9.7%	2.3%	72.068 ^a	4	.000
4	Discussing practical/theoretical issues with colleagues	5.1%	13.6%	42.0%	27.8%	11.4%	77.807 ^a	4	.000
5	Observing other teachers' classrooms	49.4%	19.9%	17.6%	8.0%	5.1%	109.000	4	.000
6	Asking peers to observe one's teaching	55.7%	22.2%	12.5%	7.4%	2.3%	159.057	4	.000
7	Reading books/articles on effective teaching	26.1%	19.3%	16.5%	19.3%	18.8%	4.625 ^a	4	.328
8	Participating in workshops/conferences	14.8%	20.5%	29.5%	21.6%	13.6%	14.227 ^a	4	.007
9	Writing articles based on classroom experiences	33.0%	17.6%	27.8%	14.8%	6.8%	38.375 ^a	4	.000
10	Searching the internet to see the recent developments	29.0%	16.5%	18.8%	21.6%	14.2%	11.500 ^a	4	.021
11	Conducting small-scale research to solve classroom problems	8.0%	26.1%	35.8%	21.6%	8.5%	49.852 ^a	4	.000
12	Thinking of classroom events as potential research topics	6.8%	17.6%	37.5%	31.8%	6.3%	71.670 ^a	4	.000
13	Talking to students to learn about their learning styles and preferences	9.7%	20.5%	29.0%	27.3%	13.6%	24.739 ^a	4	.000
14	Talking to students to learn about their family backgrounds and interests	8.5%	24.4%	34.7%	19.9%	12.5%	37.182 ^a	4	.000
15	Asking students whether they like a teaching task	17.6%	21.6%	35.2%	15.9%	9.7%	32.011 ^a	4	.000
16	Thinking about one's teaching philosophy	5.7%	14.2%	31.8%	27.3%	21.0%	38.034 ^a	4	.000
17	Thinking of the ways one's biography affects one's teaching	5.7%	20.5%	33.5%	24.4%	15.9%	37.352 ^a	4	.000
18	Thinking of the significance of one's job as a teacher	3.4%	9.7%	24.4%	26.1%	36.4%	62.239 ^a	4	.000
19	Finding out the aspects of one's teaching that cause a sense of satisfaction	2.3%	7.4%	17.6%	33.0%	39.8%	91.330 ^a	4	.000
20	Thinking about one's strengths and weaknesses as a teacher	11.4%	9.1%	13.6%	23.3%	42.6%	66.557 ^a	4	.000
21	Thinking about previous experiences as a student and its effect on teaching	8.5%	11.9%	31.3%	26.7%	21.6%	32.636 ^a	4	.000

Table 2 Continue

Items	Teacher reflection	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	χ^2	df	Asymp. sig.
22	Thinking of inconsistencies that occur in classroom practice	1.7%	11.9%	30.7%	34.7%	21.0%	64.227 ^a	4	.000
23	Discussing instances of social injustice	15.9%	24.4%	30.1%	19.9%	9.7%	21.614 ^a	4	.000
24	Thinking of ways to enable students to change their social lives	11.4%	27.3%	30.1%	17.6%	13.6%	24.284 ^a	4	.000
25	Attending to less-discussed topics such as discrimination	18.2%	25.6%	33.5%	14.2%	8.5%	33.659 ^a	4	.000
26	Thinking about political aspects of teaching	29.5%	25.0%	25.6%	11.9%	8.0%	31.443 ^a	4	.000
27	Trying to promote tolerance and democracy in class and society	14.2%	16.5%	33.5%	23.3%	12.5%	26.045 ^a	4	.000
28	Thinking about the effect of gender and social class on students' achievements	4.0%	18.2%	32.4%	28.4%	17.0%	43.375 ^a	4	.000
29	Thinking of outside social events that can influence teaching inside the class	6.3%	8.5%	33.5%	30.1%	21.6%	53.545 ^a	4	.000

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 35.2.

As represented in Table 2, the results of the chi-square test regarding the EFL teachers' reflective teaching questionnaire were statistically significant ($p < .05$) in 28 items out of 29. In other words, there were significant discrepancies between the expected and observed behaviours in case of 28 aspects of teacher reflectivity included in the questionnaire. The mere item for which there was not a significant difference between the expected and observed behaviours was item seven, which dealt with reading books and articles on effective teaching.

In the next step, the EFL teachers' perceived barriers to reflective teaching were analysed and categorized. The mentioned barriers and their frequencies are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3.

EFL Teachers' Perceived Barriers to Reflective Teaching

Category	Mentioned barriers	Frequency
Teachers	Belief in the irrelevance of reflective considerations to teaching	31
	Economic problems (financial pressures, low salary, dealing with a second job)	29
	Lack of motivation	16
	Personal life problems and concerns	11
	Belief that reflective practices are difficult and energy consuming	4

Table 3 Continue

Category	Mentioned barriers	Frequency
Students	Personal dislike of interacting with colleagues on teaching issues	5
	Colleagues' dislike of talking about teaching issues and being observed	21
	Lack of self-confidence	2
	Colleagues' too limited educational knowledge to interact with on educational issues	10
	Personal low sociopolitical knowledge	2
	Colleagues' jealousy	5
	Belief that reflective considerations make controlling class difficult	4
	Students' lack of motivation and interest	16
	Students' behavioural and informational unpreparedness	12
	Students' expectations	4
Educational System	Students' low language proficiency which requires dedicating the whole time to their improvement	6
	Large classroom population	9
	Time limitation	55
	Having to cover a lot of material	4
	Rarity of workshops/conferences on teaching/learning issues	7
	Lack of enough equipment	7
	Curriculum	11
	Book	9
	Lack of evaluative agents to assess teachers' teaching practice and teachers' high job security	4
	Strict control of cultural and religious issues	14
Macro	Giving no emotional/financial value to teachers' extra efforts	8
	Lack of planning for observation and interaction in the system	6
	Total dominance of the Ministry of Education and a technician view of teachers (top-down transmission-based approach)	15
	School principal's expectations	4
	School permission and laws	14
Micr	Political limitations and pressures	27
	Parents' expectations	5
Parents Political system		

The participants' mentioned obstacles to reflective teaching were classified into five categories, including the obstacles relevant to teachers, students, educational system (macro and micro level), political system, and parents. The total frequencies of the mentioned categories were found to be respectively 140, 38, 167, 27, and five. The category associated with the educational system was found to be the most frequently-mentioned one, and the category of parent expectations had the least frequency. Concerning individual barriers (regardless of the categorization), the results revealed that the first five most frequently-mentioned barriers were respectively attributed to

time limitation, teachers' belief in the irrelevance of reflective considerations to teaching, teachers' economic problems, political limitations, and colleagues' dislike of talking about teaching issues and being observed.

Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

Indicating an inappropriate situation regarding the status of reflective teaching in Iranian state high schools, the results of the study revealed that, save for item seven, in case of all items of the instrument, the results of the chi-square test were significant. It could be inferred that the state high schools' EFL teachers highly disregarded various dimensions of reflective teaching. The results are in congruence with Rahimi and Chabok's (2013) report on the status of reflective teaching in Iran. The findings implied that Iran's EFL teacher education has fallen behind acceptable trends, and its approach toward teacher-learning is in harmony with traditional perspectives. As Sangani and Stelma (2011) refer to, the public system of pre-service teacher education does not take required actions to promote the status quo. Research conducted by Eslami and Fatahi (2008) suggests that having finished pre-service teacher training, Iranian EFL teachers are prepared to follow grammatically-oriented teaching strategies. The existing situation requires serious attention of EFL teacher education centres. The results of goodness of fit chi-square test indicated that, in case of item seven, there was a significant discrepancy between the observed and expected behaviours. This item dealt with teachers' attention to reading books and articles on effective teaching. The reason behind such a finding could be the fact that a good number of participants had entered higher education. Studying at the higher education level is accompanied with studying TEFL books and articles. Such EFL teachers are not highly representative of the country's EFL teachers.

Taking account of the thematic analysis of teachers' perceived challenges to reflective teaching, five broad categories were extracted, including obstacles relevant to teachers, students, educational system (macro and micro level), political system, and parents. The challenging obstacles associated with the category of educational system were found to have the highest frequency. At macro level, the educational system dealt with the following problematic areas: time restriction, absolute dominance of the Ministry of Education, the technician view toward teachers, populated classrooms, curriculum, and book. At micro level, school permission and its inhibitive laws were frequently referred to as challenging factors. Consistent to the findings of this research, prior studies on reflective teaching acknowledged the inhibitory role of centrally controlled educational system, institutional demands, textbook, syllabus, large classroom population, and heavy volume of educational content (Mälkki and Lindblom-Ylännne, 2012; Sangani & Stelma, 2011). According to Akbari (2008b), decentralization of decision making in terms of content and teaching methodology is one of the fundamental requirements of reflective teaching. He believes that as long as ministerial authorities are considered as the merely qualified agents for educational decision making, classroom problems will not be solved. Along the same lines, Mehrmohammadi (2004) believes that "teachers are almost entirely excluded from the decision making process by the centralized system of education in Iran" (p. 139).

Concerning the issue of time limitation, the weekly hours of English courses are decided by the Ministry of Education. Moreover, curriculum, teaching content, and books are highly affected by decisions made at the upper levels of educational administration. Thus, some fundamental changes at the level of the Ministry of Education are required.

The second most frequently-mentioned category of challenging obstacles referred to teacher-relevant factors. These factors included teachers' financial problems, their belief in the irrelevance of reflective considerations, lack of motivation, personal life problems and concerns, as well as colleagues' dislike of collaboration and their limited knowledge on educational issues. Concerning financial problems, Sangani and Stelma (2011) argue that financial constraints, low salaries, and preoccupation with second job are among significant factors that negatively affect reflective teacher development and practice in developing countries. Akbari (2008a) resembles teachers to factory workers in terms of long working hours, low payment, and poor working conditions. He believes that teachers' financial and occupational challenges do not leave them with the time and willingness to act as reflective practitioners. Given as such, it is inferred that teachers' financial well-being is an important prerequisite to their reflective orientations.

Another noticeable obstacle among teacher-relevant inhibitive factors was teachers' belief in the irrelevance of reflective considerations to teaching. Such perspectives have roots in teachers' unfamiliarity with reflective teaching, and teacher education programs seem responsible for these patterns of thought. It seems that pre-service teacher education centres do not pay adequate attention to reflective practice. Furthermore, having finished the period of studying TEFL, the prospective teachers mainly get deprived of influential training to renew their knowledge and keep pace with the pedagogical approaches in vogue. The in-service teacher education programs are inefficient, and teachers' teaching is mainly dependent on a predetermined transmitted body of knowledge received during the early pre-service teacher education. Hence, one can easily find numerous in-service teachers with a fossilized knowledge of EFL pedagogy. Given as such, the consideration of reflective teaching in pre-service and in-service teacher education programs is suggested.

Another teacher-relevant obstacle dealt with teachers' poor collaboration with colleagues in observing each other's teaching, providing support, and giving feedback. According to Richards and Lockhart (1994), "teachers are often reluctant to take part in observation or related activities since observation is associated with evaluation" (p.12). As an advantageous process associated with teacher growth and professional development (Johnson, 2009; Valencia & Killion, 1988), peer observation requires safe environments, in which teachers view themselves as peers, who do not hold positions of dominance over each other (Aukland, 1991; Johnson, 2009). Teachers must know the aim is describing and learning from each other, not judging and evaluating (Pacheco, 2005). Along with emotional security and adequate instruction, EFL teachers should be culturally prepared and do not find their identity endangered. It is suggested that collaborative skills be introduced and practiced in pre-service and in-service teacher education programs to be internalized and fostered.

The third broad category of obstacles dealt with student-relevant factors, including students' expectations, demotivation and behavioural, affective, and informational unpreparedness. In a similar vein, Minnot (2010) referred to poor student behaviour as an obstacle to teacher reflective practice. Additionally, Mälkki and Lindblom-Yläne (2012) pointed to students' expectation as a significant factor challenging teachers' reflective practice. According to them, students sometimes are reluctant to reflective education due to their tendency to "the kind of learning environment they are used to, based on their histories as students" (p. 47). Students' discipline as well as prior experience and familiarity with reflective approach could potentially facilitate the actualization of reflective teaching. It is noteworthy that the application of reflective teaching is more plausible in less populated classrooms in which more discipline and motivation exist. The fourth broad category of barriers refers to political limitations and pressures. Such obstacles have been warned about in the literature. Akbari (2008a) referred to social and political barriers as challenges to postmethod pedagogy. Kumaravadivelu (2006) pointed to ideological barriers, imposed by political, economic, and cultural forces that are in favour of unequal power relations and marginalization. It is important to be realistic and avoid exaggeration and perfectionism in discussing teachers' role; however, reflective teachers can peacefully raise awareness about ideological issues and play a part in reducing the hegemonic power of education. Finally, the last category of inhibiting factors refers to parents' expectations. Along with principals and students, parents might have certain beliefs and expectations that might be contradictory to teachers' reflective practice. In such situations, informing parents about the advantages of reflective teaching and its role in promoting teaching effectiveness could be fruitful.

It is noteworthy that this study had some limitations. The participants were selected through convenience sampling from five provinces of Iran, and this could lower representativeness. It is suggested that this study gets replicated with a wide range of participants coming from various provinces. It is hoped that this study has shed some light on the areas that should be prioritized in surmounting the obstacles to reflective teaching and could act as a positive step towards mitigating EFL educational problems.

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