The relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' reflective behavior and their proficiency level

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Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between Iranian EFL Teachers' reflective behavior as well as their gender and their proficiency level. It also aimed to probe sub-scales of teachers' reflectivity as the best predictors of teachers' proficiency to determine whether different aspects of teacher reflectivity, namely, practical, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and critical reflection had a noticeable impact on the proficiency level of Iranian EFL teachers. To this end, an IELTS test comprising four skills as well as the Language Teachers' Reflective Inventory (LTRI) were administered to 60 English teachers in three institutes in Shiraz, Iran. The results revealed a low positive relationship between reflectivity and teachers' EFL proficiency. Besides, among all sub-scales of teachers' reflectivity, just cognitive and practical had a significant contribution in predicting the scores on proficiency at p<.05. In addition, no significant difference was seen in scores for different genders with respect to their reflectivity.

Keywords: Iranian EFL teachers; reflective behavior; proficiency level; cognitive reflectivity; practical reflectivity

1. Introduction

In the recent decades, teacher education programs have started to incorporate reflection into their agendas in order to meet the requirements of the varying needs in the society. Accordingly, it seems safe to claim that reflective practice is getting an imperative part of ESL/EFL teacher education programs among a range of factors which affect teacher development worldwide.

Calderhead & Shorrock, (1997), aptly explain the relation between student teachers' experiences and their skill development, as resulting in creating models of professional progress to be able to outline the structure of future courses.

Teachers' reflectivity can also play a role in their language proficiency, as it has been theorized that teacher's language proficiency could filter classroom language input (Andrews, 2001). It means where a teacher's proficiency in English is poor, he may prioritize developing his language skills at the cost of developing his teaching skills. As a result, such language teacher may suffer from handicaps which constrain his/her teaching competence. Then again, a teacher's weak command of L2 proficiency can

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be transferred to their students (Stander, as cited in Nel & Müller, 2010). Kumaravadivelu (2006) puts a similar emphasis on the role of language teachers as knowledge generators rather than knowledge consumers.

Drawing on insights from the field of psychology, which has shown how knowledge and beliefs put forward a strong influence on human action, the present study suggests that understanding teacher reflection is central to the process of understanding teaching. According, in this study, it is intended to provide a close investigation of reflection in teachers' education. The aim is, thus, to understand the nature of teacher reflection among Iranian EFL teachers and to determine whether different aspects of teacher reflectivity have a noticeable impact on the proficiency level of Iranian EFL teachers. More precisely, the study addresses the following purposes:

- Understanding the nature and concept of teacher reflection among Iranian EFL teachers;
- Verifying the relationships between aspects of reflectivity (namely, practical, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and critical reflection) and proficiency among Iranian language teachers;
- Examining gender differences in teacher reflection.

1.1. Literature review

1.1.1. Reflection and reflective teaching

Reflection is known as a purposeful act of thinking which seeks solutions to problems encountered. In this vein, reflective teacher, based on Valli (1997, p.70) is described as the individual who "is able to look back on events; make judgments; and alter his/her behaviors in light of skill, research, and ethical knowledge" (as cited in Minott, 2008).

According to Farrell (2004, p.2), teachers "collect data about their teaching, examine their attitudes, and teaching practices, and use the information as a basis for critical reflection on teaching." Alternatively, Cowan (1998) describes reflection as "looking back on the action contained in past experiences" (p. 36). Then again, Bartlett (1990) considers critical reflection as a process in which an experience is recalled, considered, and evaluated, typically in relation to a wider purpose. Besides, to become a reflective educator requires moving beyond a primary concern with instructional techniques and "how to" questions and asking "what" and "why" questions that regard instructions and managerial techniques not as ends in themselves, but as part of broader educational purposes.

According to Wellington (1991), reflective teaching is an essential characteristic of a competent teacher, as it is regarded as "a cycle of thought and action based on professional experience" (p. 4). Besides, Mezirow (1990) believed that critical reflection take place when people analyse and examine the validity of their assumptions and assess the suitability of their perception and attitudes given their existing circumstances.

Based on Brookfield (1990) three phases are involved in any critical reflection, including identifying the assumptions underlying opinions and actions; evaluating their validity and relation to 'real-life' practices and existing circumstances; and transforming them to get more comprehensive and all-embracing for future performances.

1.1.2. Aspects of teacher reflectivity

Dewey (1933) describes five noticeable steps in reflective practice after the initial pre-reflective doubt stage as follows: (1) suggestions, (2) intellectualization, (3) hypothesizing, (4) reasoning, and (5) testing the hypothesis through action. Schon (1983) distinguishes between *reflection in action*, reflecting while doing something and *reflection on action*, reflection after doing something. Van Manen (1991) added a third dimension of reflection, namely, reflection for action or anticipatory reflection, which

refers to the teachers' freedom to set a plan, decide what to do, and consider the possible outcomes of the actions.

Griffiths and Tann (1992) subdivide *reflection-in-action* into two groups: *rapid reaction*, which involves an act-react sequence and *repair*, which involves a reaction-monitor-react sequence. Likewise, they subdivide *reflection-on-action* into three categories of *review*, *research*, and *re-theorizing*.

Van Manen (1977) identifies three hierarchical levels of teacher reflectivity. The lowest level has to do with applications of knowledge to achieve an end. Thus, it focuses on means rather than the ends. The second level is an interpretive one in which the meaning and assumptions of the current praxis are examined. The third and the highest level of reflection is a critical one in which such issues as worth of education with reference to societal and ethical aspects of education are critically examined.

Brookfield (1995) advocates critical reflection through the identification of assumptions that underlie teachers' cognition. The process starts with a critical incident, namely, a specific event in one's practice that gives one a "high of excitement, satisfaction, and fulfillment" (p. 182). He, also, proposes four autobiographical lens, students' eyes, the colleagues' experiences, and theoretical literature for the process of critical reflection.

Farrell (2004) identifies five stages of reflective teaching: a) getting started with reflective practice using teaching portfolios, keeping diaries, discussing with colleagues, and observing others, b) participants attending to a set of rules and regulations which must be established in advance, c) teachers preparing for four phases of reflection, i.e. "individual time", "activity time", "development time", and "reflection time" (p. 33), d) being a reflective teacher not only as an individual experience but as to keep in touch with colleagues and keep updated about the low-down in the field, and e) fulfilling the previous phase in a context void of anxiety.

Three levels of reflection, i.e., action/technical rationality, conceptual, and critical/ethical or dialectical are presented by Day (1993). The first level deals with a teacher's actions and manners in the classroom; the second level concerns the theories behind his/her' manners and behaviors, and the third level is rooted in the wider community affecting teachers' beliefs and practices.

According to Jay and Johnson (2002) reflective practice comprises three steps of descriptive, comparative, and critical. In descriptive step, the problem is identified, described and recognized. In comparative reflection the channel(s) or frame(s) through which the problem at hand can be tackled will be given some thought. The teacher thinks about others' ideas and other alternatives and compares them to that of him/her-self. Finally, in critical step teachers look at the diverse lookouts of a state or issue and all the actors involved.

Pacheco (2005) provides a five-component critical reflection which is believed to be in accordance with Schon's interpretations of reflectivity. They include identifying the problem, dealing with the problem after comparing it with similar situations and finding about significance of the one at hand, evaluating and re-evaluating the problem, addressing the issue to know about the results, and finally, investigating the consequences of the solution employed to see whether it has worked or not.

1.1.3. Teacher proficiency

Based on Briguglio and Kirkpatrick (1996), most stakeholders in the field have a broad view of 'language teacher proficiency' including attributes of a competent language teacher, while the main concern of those interviewed was actually linguistic proficiency. Yet the term language teacher proficiency implies that there is more to language teaching than simply linguistic knowledge. Briguglio and Kirkpatrick (1996) consider teacher proficiency as the summation of language teaching and learning which embraces many factors such as school or classroom settings, teacher sustenance, teacher morale, and occupational structures that contribute to successful language programs.

Hogston and Simpson (1999) use the terms teacher language proficiency versus language teacher proficiency to underline a significant confusion as to the relationship of teacher proficiency and linguistic proficiency. Besides, Ingram and Walters (2007) propose a model consisting of two main modules: language proficiency standards and professional standards.

1.1.3.1. Language proficiency frameworks

Like many other abstract phenomena it is not easy to define proficiency. A dictionary meaning may compare proficiency with such unclear words as ability, competence, qualifications, etc. In the same token, linguistic proficiency is the capability of an individual to speak or perform in an acquired language. However, as Chastain (1989) pointed out such a definition is too inexact and often leads to fuzzy thinking. Some models have tried to define this notion in specific ways which include Lado's (1961) skill and component model, Oller's (1976) integrative model, and various models of communicative competence.

Lado's (1961) model of language competence is a multi-componential one in which language skills are distinguished from components of knowledge (grammar, vocabulary, and phonology/graphology). Oller's model (1976), on the other hand, is a unitary one, which asserts that language proficiency consists of a single holistic ability. From 1980 on this view of language proficiency has been confronted by some experimental studies. Oller (1983) as its chief proponent abandoned the theory at least in its strongest explanation. The unitary trait view has been replaced by the outlook that language proficiency is multi-componential, comprising a number of interconnected particular capabilities together with a set of overall strategies or procedures. Currently the most influential model of language proficiency is that proposed by Bachman (1990) and Bachman and Palmer (1996).

Bachman's conception of language proficiency is influenced by Hymes' (1972) conception of communicative competence, which conglomerates awareness of the language system with cultural conventions, norms, etc. (Savignon, 1983). Several models have since been proposed for communicative competence. Canale and Swain (1981) provided a useful starting point and took communicative competence to include grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. The model was subsequently updated by Canale (1983), who proposed a four dimensional model comprising linguistic, sociolinguistic, discoursal and strategic competencies; the additional distinction being made between sociolinguistic competence (knowledge of sociocultural rules) and textual competence (knowledge of cohesion and coherence). Later, Bachman (1990) and Bachman and Palmer (1996) proposed a framework consistent with earlier definitions of communicative language ability. This model includes language competence, strategic competence, and psycho-physiological mechanisms.

A comparison between Lado's model (1961) and Bachman's model (1990) reveals two important differences. First, it is a truism that Bachman's model is concerned with the knowledge of language, yet it is also concerned with the appropriate practice of it in real situations, which is dealt with under pragmatic competence. Second, unlike previous models, in which sentence was the ultimate unit of analysis, it takes both sentence and text into account under the names of grammatical and textual competences. That being said, this model has not been without its criticism.

1.1.4. Empirical studies

Many studies have been done on reflection and reflective teaching since its introduction by Dewey (1993) and Schon (1987). Most of the studies have been done to expand the horizons of the concept in education (Brookfield, 2000; Schaak-Distad& Brownstein, 2004). Some others are done to investigate the incorporation of reflection components in teacher education programs (Brookfield, 2000; Dinkelman, 2000; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Mueller & Skamp, 2003; Whipp, 2003). Also, some of these experimental studies are done to illustrate the significance of reflection in educational settings. For

instance, Kocoglu, Akyel, & Ercetin (2008), among others, have examined the function of preparing portfolio in escalating reflective thinking among EFL teachers.

Minott (2008) analyzed the subjects' reflective journals to determine the types of reflection used by teachers and concluded that teachers do not take advantages of all kinds of reflections proposed by Valli (1997). Minott (2008) found two levels of reflectivity among his participants, as more reflective and less reflective teachers. While the former group were teachers who reflected on their schools' context, the latter group might not see any connection between contextual challenges and their beliefs, practical knowledge, and mood.

To measure reflection in English language pedagogy, Akbari, Behzadpour and Dadvand (2010) developed and validated an instrument which comprised practical, cognitive, learner, metacognitive, critical and moral elements.

Following Murphy (2001) and Tice (2002), they included a *practical element* in their inventory, which deals with the tools the teachers use for their reflection such as 'lesson reports', 'action research', 'group discussions'. The *learner element* deals with reflections on the students' cognitive and emotional responses, and hence how the students learn, respond or behave emotionally.

Following Richards & Farrell (2005), Akbari et al. (2010) included a *cognitive element* in their inventory, which has to do with teachers' attempts to develop professionally. Among the activities included in this area are reading the professional literature, participating in seminars and conferences as well as doing action research. The *metacognitive element* deals with teachers' reflections on their own opinions and character. Metacognition is often defined as "cognition about cognition", or "knowing about knowing".

In addition, Akbari et al. (2010) included a *critical element* in their inventory, which refers to reflections upon the socio-political issues and comprises reflecting on the significance of topics like equality, sexim, solidarity and empowerment and the roles they may impose on pedagogy.

1.2. Research questions

In the current study, the following questions were addressed:

1. Is there any relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' reflective behavior and their linguistic proficiency level?
2. Which sub-scale(s) of teachers' reflectivity is/are the best predictor(s) of teachers' proficiency?
3. Is there a relationship between gender and teachers' reflective behavior?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

This study was carried out on 60 EFL teachers (30 females and 30 males) with BA or MA qualifications in language teaching who taught at high intermediate level in private language institutes of Iran, Navid and Shamim Arghavan Language Academy of Shiraz. The participants whose age ranged from 25 to 43, were selected based on non-probability purposive sampling, and all majored in TEFL, with 3 to 15 years' experience of teaching at different levels of proficiency.

2.2. Instruments

In the current research study, for the purpose of data collection two main instruments (i.e., teachers' reflective inventory as well as one proficiency test (IELTS) were employed.

2.2.1. Teachers' reflective inventory

The first instrument used as a measure of teacher reflectivity was English Language Teaching Reflection Inventory which was developed and validated by Akbari, Behzadpoor, and Dadvand (2010) in Iranian context. The inventory consists of 29 five-point Likert-scale items and its Cronbach's alpha reliability was estimated to be 0.91. The inventory requires the respondents to state their reflective practice by representing whether they always (5), often (4), sometimes (3), seldom (2), and never (1) It consists of five subscales, namely, practical, cognitive, affective, metacognitive, and critical reflection subscales.

2.2.2. IELTS test

The second instrument used in the study was four skills IELTS test which stands for International English Language Testing System. As the world's most popular English language proficiency test for higher education and global migration the IELTS test measures English language proficiency in four skills of reading, listening, writing and speaking.

2.3. Data collection procedures

The participants were primarily asked to fill out the questionnaire, namely, the English Language Teacher Reflective Inventory (ELTRI) and then they were given the IELTS test. Data collection procedure took approximately three weeks. Having collected the data, the researcher analyzed them and extracted the results.

2.4. Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were computed through some statistical techniques, meaning that, the Mean, the Standard Deviation, Frequency, and Percentage of the relevant items and variables were estimated. Then, the data were subjected to other statistical techniques. Correlation was conducted to see the relationship between the two variables, namely, teachers' reflectivity, and their proficiency. Multiple regression was run to investigate how well each of the sub-scales of the teachers' reflectivity, namely, metacognitive, cognitive, critical, practical, and affective factors on and language proficiency can predict their proficiency, and finally, independent sample t-test was run to investigate the effect of teachers' gender on their reflective behavior.

3. Results

3.1. Response to RQ1

The first question dealt with is whether there is a relationship between teachers' reflective behavior and their proficiency. Thus, a correlation was run to investigate the existence of significant relationship between teachers' reflectivity and proficiency. Table 1 represents the correlation between teacher reflectivity and proficiency.

Table 1. Correlation between teachers' reflectivity and their proficiency

		Reflective Teaching	Proficiency Level
Reflective Teaching	Pearson Correlation	1	.385
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.005
	N	60	60
Proficiency Level	Pearson Correlation	.385	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005	
	N	60	60

According to table 1, there is a low positive correlation between the teachers' reflectivity and proficiency, *r=38, n=60, p<.005,* with low levels of teachers' reflectivity associated with lower levels of proficiency.

3.2. *Response to RQ2*

The second question dealt with in this study is which sub-scale(s) of teachers' reflectivity is/are the best predictor(s) of their proficiency. Thus, a multiple regression test was used to check out any significant relationship between features of teacher reflectivity, namely, practical, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and critical reflection and language proficiency among Iranian language teachers. Table 2 is a model summary of the effect of teacher reflectivity on teachers' proficiency.

Table 2. Model Summary of the relationship between participants' reflectivity and EFL proficiency

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.499[a]	.250	.206	.56608

[a.] Predictors: (Constant), practical, cognitive, affective, metacognitive, and critical

Table 2 indicates that the total variance explained by the model (including subscales of practical, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and critical reflectivity) as whole was 25%, P<.005. In other words, 25% of the variable in the teacher's proficiency scores is explained by the independent variable, which is teacher's reflectivity.

To find out how strong the relationship between EFL proficiency and each of its five predictors is, the standardized and unstandardized coefficients of the model along with their t-value and significance levels were checked. Table 3 summarizes the findings.

Table 3. Model diagnostics and regression coefficients for the relationship between aspects of teacher reflectivity and teachers' EFL proficiency

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	Beta	Std. Error	beta		
1 (Constant)	6.235	.626		9.963	.000
Practical	.790	.169	.450	.407	.000
Cognitive	.990	.148	.502	.324	.000
Affective	.489	.114	.341	.241	.000
metacognitive	.649	.180	.417	.118	.000
Critical	.235	.129	.189	.979	.005

As shown in Table 3, cognitive reflection was one of the predictors of proficiency with the largest beta coefficient of .990. This means that this variable makes the strong unique contribution to the dependent variable. In other words, for every one standard deviation in the scores measuring affective reflection, there will be .99 of a standard deviation in the EFL proficiency test scores. Another contributing beta coefficient is practical reflection (beta=.790, P<.05) corroborated with a significance alpha level. It means the variable contributes significantly to proficiency, too. These findings reveal that among all above factors, just two had a significance contribution in predicting the scores on proficiency at p<.05.

3.3. Response to RQ3

The third question dealt with in this research is whether there is a relationship between gender and reflective practice among language teachers. To answer this question, an independent sample t-test was run to check out any significant relationship between the two above-mentioned variables. Tables 4 and 5 depict descriptive statistics and t-test results, respectively.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of male and female reflectivity

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Reflective Teaching	Male	30	2.4052	.39962	.08936
	Female	30	2.2905	.33258	.05258

Table 5. Independent samples t-test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Reflective Teaching Equal variances assumed	2.054	.157	1.17	58	.244	.11466	.09748	-.08046	.30977
Equal variances not assumed			1.10	32.5	.277	.11466	.10368	-.09640	.32571

As indicated in Table 5, there is no significant difference in scores for females (M=2.29, SD=.33) and males, (M=2.40, SD=.39); t (58) = 1.176 with respect to their reflectivity.

4. Discussion

This research study sought to find the relationship between teacher reflectivity and their proficiency among EFL institute teachers. This study also aimed to investigate which sub-scales of Teachers' Reflectivity is/are the best predictor(s) of their proficiency. Besides, it aimed to reveal whether there is a relationship between gender and reflective practice among language teachers.

Considering the first research question, the results of the statistics revealed a low positive correlation between the two variables, $r=38$, $n=60$, $p<.005$, with low levels of teachers' reflectivity associated with lower levels of proficiency.

Concerning the second research question, cognitive reflection was one of the predictors of proficiency with the largest beta coefficient of .990, which means this variable makes the solid exclusive contribution to the dependent variable. That is, for every one standard deviation in the scores measuring affective reflection, there will be .99 of a standard deviation in the EFL proficiency test scores. Another contributing beta coefficient is practical reflection (beta=.790, P<.05) corroborated with a significance alpha level. It means the variable contributes significantly to proficiency, too. These findings reveal that among all above factors, just two had a significance contribution in predicting the scores on proficiency at p<.05.

Regarding the third research question, an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare teachers' reflectivity score for males and females. As indicated above, there was no significant difference in scores for females (M=2.29, SD= .33) and males, (M= 2.40, SD= .39); t (58) = 1.176 with respect to their reflectivity.

5. Conclusions

This study considered reflective behavior as a predictor of proficiency level among Iranian English teachers. The first research question asks whether there is a general relationship between teachers' reflectivity and proficiency. It was hypothesized that there is no relationship between teachers' reflective behavior and their proficiency level. The results revealed a low correlation between the two above-mentioned variables.

The second research question dealt with in this study is which sub-scales of teachers' reflectivity is/are the best predictor(s) of their proficiency. To find answer to this question, a multiple regression test was run to probe any significant relationship between aspects of teachers' reflectivity, namely, practical, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and critical reflection and language proficiency among Iranian language teachers. The results indicated that a clear relationship exist between cognitive and practical aspects of teacher reflection and their EFL proficiency.

The third question asks whether there is a gender difference with respect to teachers' reflectivity. Accordingly, it was hypothesized that there is no relationship between gender and teacher's reflective behavior. However, the results revealed no significant difference between male and female teachers in this respect. In sum, it was found that cognitively and practicality reflective teachers tend to be more proficient than their counterparts.

The findings suggest that every aspect of a teacher's work depends on his reflective style including the effective use of language (proficiency). As such, it can be concluded that teacher language proficiency is a complex construct that is influenced by a variety of factors. On the other hand, the effect of teacher's language proficiency goes far beyond the teacher himself/herself as it is a factor facilitating teacher-student interaction.

As a whole, features contributing to teacher proficiency need to be considered further. This study used a rather small group of subjects. With a larger number of subjects, the researcher could have used more complicated statistical processes such as structural equation modeling which would give way a more detailed search of the roles that many factors play in teacher proficiency. In addition, employing both qualitative and quantitative research methods and mixing them together could have improved the results. In addition, interpretations of the findings of this research can lead to several suggestions for further researches.

1. Teachers might take advantage more from peer interaction. It is suggested that a study should be performed to consider the effect of peer interaction on increasing teacher proficiency.

2. This study was conducted in Shiraz, in some English Institutes. The present study can be reproduced in other parts of the country in different socio-economic contexts.

3. It is suggested that a research study should be carried out in order to find out how much experiences of teachers would affect their language proficiency and reflective behavior.

Acknowledgements

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İranlı EFL öğretmenlerinin yansıtıcı davranışları ve yeterlik düzeyleri arasındaki ilişki

Öz

Bu çalışmada, İranlı EFL Öğretmenlerinin yansıtıcı davranışları ile cinsiyet ve yeterlilik düzeyleri arasındaki ilişki araştırılmıştır. Ayrıca öğretmenlerin yansıtıcılığının alt ölçeklerinin öğretmenlerin yansıtıcılığının en iyi yordayıcıları, yani pratik, bilişsel, üstbilişsel, duyuşsal ve eleştirel yansımalarını sorgulamaları amaçlanmıştır. İranlı EFL öğretmenlerinin İngilizce Öğretmenlerinin Yansıtıcı Envanteri (LTRI), Şiraz, İran'daki üç kurumda 60 İngilizce öğretmenine uygulanmıştır. Çalışmanın sonuçları, yansıtıcılık ile öğretmenlerin EFL yeterliliği arasında pozitif bir ilişki olduğunu göstermiştir. Ayrıca, öğretmenlerin yansıtıcılığının tüm alt ölçekleri arasında, sadece bilişsel ve pratik, p <.05'te yeterlik puanlarının tahmin edilmesine önemli bir katkı sağlamıştır. Ayrıca, kadın ve erkeklerin puanlarının yansıtıcılıklarına göre anlamlı bir fark göstermemiştir.

Anahtar sözcükler: İranlı EFL öğretmenleri; yansıtıcı davranış; uzmanlık seviyesi; bilişsel yansıtma; pratik yansıtma

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