



Enhancing EFL Education: The Power of Reflective Teaching Practices

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Abstract

The importance of reflection in enhancing teachers' professional development has been widely acknowledged. Yet, not much is known about how EFL pre-service teachers embrace reflection and how they perceive reflective practice as one of the tools to improve their professional development. The current study attempts to address this gap by investigating how EFL pre-service teachers reflect on their teaching performances and perceive their reflective practices. Employing a mixed approach, the study involved 45 teacher candidates who were taking the Practicum at a private university in San Jose, Costa Rica. Quantitative data were elicited using a questionnaire and the qualitative data from open ended questions in the instrument as well as content analysis of portfolio entries and a self-reflecting video made by the participants, based on Farrell's model for reflective practice. The findings show that student teachers seem to lack comprehension about what reflective practice is and the participants showed little engagement on deep and serious reflection based on their beliefs, practices and critical analysis of their own performance, even though they seem to acknowledge the importance of reflection. More information and training on how to reflect appropriately is needed to create a permanent reflective practice among pre-service EFL teachers and encourage a life-long commitment to reflective practice as a means for professional development.

Keywords: *pre-service teachers; reflective teaching, practicum; English teacher education, reflection*

1. Introduction

Language teaching is multifaceted, involving not only linguistic expertise, but also knowledge of educational theories, empathy, and a commitment to continuous learning; it is "a lifelong endeavor and a way of being" (Nurkamto & Sarosa, 2020 p.46).

Literature evidences the plethora of advantages of reflective teaching (Cirocki & Farrell, 2017; Dexter & Wall, 2021); Geneva, 2018, Machost & Stains, 2023; Moti, 2022; Permana et al., 2023; Rahnama, et al., 2016; Slade et al., 2019; Tuncer & Özkan, 2021).

Yet, there seems to be lack of empirical research in this field (Ningsih & Lengkanawati, 2023). Within this framework, the value of the current research is contributing to fill the gap about the impact of reflective practice in pre service EFL teachers in Costa Rica, and determining how it is perceived by them. The present study relies on the following research questions:

1. How much do pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers reflect upon their practice?
2. How comfortable are the future EFL teachers reflecting about themselves as individuals and as educators?
3. What is the EFL pre service teachers' perception of reflective practice?

2. Literary Review

2.1. Reflective Practice

Reflective practice was defined Finlay (2008) as 'learning through and from experience' which provides educators opportunities to meditate about themselves and their performance, impacting quality of teaching. This is not merely taking a few minutes to think about a class, it is in essence "a way of life" (Farrell, 2023 p. 136).



Figure 1
Framework for reflecting on practice (Farrell, 2015)

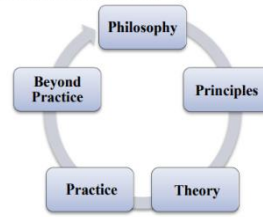


Figure 1 illustrates Farrell's five stage model (2015 cited in Farrell, 2019) explained below.

- Philosophy: associated to background information (e.g. social class, education, family values, religion)
- Principles are the beliefs teachers possess about the acquisition of the language (Alvarado Gutierrez et al., 2019).
- Theory is related to the linguistic knowledge and how it should be transmitted (Alvarado Gutierrez et al., 2019)
- Practice refers to a teacher's observable behavior either during or after the teaching episode.
- Beyond practice or **reflection-for-action** (Chien, 2013 cited in Cirocki & Farrell, 2017) refers to a broader reflection

2.2. Teaching Practicum

Teaching practicum is a mandatory, transitional stage culminating the academic preparation where STs gradually assume the responsibilities of an educator (Zhilong Xie, 2023). It is important in STs formation because it prepares them for authentic teaching and learning environments (Bonilla Medina & Samacá Bohórquez, 2020) providing opportunities to experience hands on the classroom realities, which frequently do not align with the learnt theory (Barham, 2023).

3. Methodology

3.1. Context

At Universidad Americana, the Practicum lasts 15 weeks. Under the guidance of a professor and the supervision of a mentor at the host institution, STs must plan, prepare and execute the required mediation activities following the program provided by high school. The host institutions were all high schools from public and private sectors, mostly located in urban areas near or in the capital city. With the intention of collecting data pertinent to this investigation, the STs were required to include reflective practice as part of the experience. They had to write a short reflection after each lesson in their teaching portfolio. Furthermore, they were asked to complete a questionnaire which explored perceptions, and they were also asked to record at the end of the term, a five-minute video following a series of prompts.

The study was divided into two stages which coincided with two different cohorts of students who were taking the practicum at two different times. The reason for this emerged when the first cohort demonstrated an evident lack of interest. Consequently, the second cohort was introduced to the concept of reflective practice on the first session of the Practicum. In addition to the e-portfolio, the video was included in the evaluation schema.

3.2. Research Design

This study was conducted under a mixed method approach; quantitative and qualitative data were collected to investigate the STs understanding and appraisal of the benefits of reflective teaching, through instruments and content analysis. It is a non-experimental design and cross-sectional in nature.

3.2.1. Sample / Participants



Two cohorts of teacher trainees participated; 13 out of 15 pre-service EFL teachers completed the questionnaire; none recorded videos. In the second cohort, 30 STs completed all tasks: questionnaire, e-portfolio, and video. The sample was chosen by convenience. The questionnaire was voluntary with an informed consent. Reflections after each class were mandatory and graded. For the second group, videos were also a requisite.

3.2.2. Data Collection Procedures

Quantitative data were gathered through a digital questionnaire consisting of fourteen closed-questions using a Likert scale ranging from totally disagree (1) to totally agree (5) following Farrell's model visible on figure 1, and some open-ended questions.

The qualitative component of the study encompasses some open-ended items on the instrument, the reflective portion of the e-portfolios, and the transcripts of the five-minute video.

3.2.3 Data Analysis

For the quantitative data, descriptive statistics such as percentages, mean and standard deviation were utilized. For the Likert scale type items, the determined range was from 1.0-1.79 representing a very low categorization, 1.8-2.59 as low; 2.6-3.39 neutral, 3.4-4.19 as high, and 4.2-5.0 very high.

The qualitative data followed conventional content analyses of the entries from the e-portfolios, defined as an inductive approach in which the researcher creates categories that emerge from the content (Humble & Mozellus, 2022). The recordings were analyzed through a Qualitative Thematic Analysis (QTA), enabling the researcher to gain in-depth information on student-teachers' attitudes and perceptions. The aim with QTA is to provide comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019).

4. Results, Discussion and Conclusions

4.1 Questionnaire Results

On table 1 the mean of the results to the closed questions using a Likert scale are presented, along with the standard deviation. These items include the first four dimensions of the reflecting framework described by Farrell (see figure 1).

Table 1. Teacher trainees' perception of reflecting framework

	Cohort1		Cohort 2	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Philosophy				
Background influences teaching practice	3,846	0,863	3.36	1.22
Personality affects teaching practice	3,769	1,249	3.97	1.01
My actions as teacher reflects my values and beliefs	3, 846	0,948	4.46	0.71
Principles				
Frequent revision of teaching principles	3,385	0,836	4.13	0.71
View of teaching changed after the Practicum	4,538	0,843	4.07	1.12
Theory				
Follows one approach or method	2,923	0,917	3.60	0.95
Activities and material are selected based on teaching theories	3,692	0,991	3.86	1.20
Practice				
Regular analysis of lessons identifying weaknesses	4,307	0,462	4.4	0.66



Cohort 1 N=13
Cohort 2 N=30

S.D. Standard deviation

Regarding the first dimension (figure 1), background (education, socio economic condition, and others) as a variable affecting teaching performance received in the first cohort a mean of 3.8 which represents a high appraisal, similar to other findings (Farrell & Avezjik, 2021). The second group has a mean of 3.36 which falls under the category of neutral position. This discrepancy could be explained by age, or by gender distribution, as the first group had a considerably larger female representation, and women have a tendency to be more empathic (Chenyu, et al, 2023; Löffler & Greitemeyer, 2023). As a second item, STs valued personality traits highly and in terms of values and beliefs the first cohort reported a high perception while the second one appreciated them very highly.

Discrepancies emerged in the second dimension. Revision of teaching principles tends to a neutral stance (first cohort) and in the second group it is praised highly.

The theoretical aspect received mixed perceptions across groups, one as neutral and high appraisal, reflecting the ongoing debate whether to follow one teaching method (Sarifa,2020) or to use several (Abramova & Mashoshina, 2021; Farrel & Avezjik, 2021).

The practice dimension received high appraisal, likely due to its obligatory nature as part of the e-portfolio. Nevertheless, content analysis revealed incomplete or superficial reflections. Three additional open-ended questions were incorporated to explore more this variable.

Participants unanimously cited lack of student participation and behavioral issues as primary challenges, corroborating Umar's (2022) findings. Time management concerns were prevalent, echoing previous studies (Naseem et al., 2023; Shooshtari et al., 2019; Van et al., 2022). Other challenges included having to face students with special needs or lower English proficiency akin to Lee (2023), lesson planning difficulties, similar to findings by Shooshtari et al., (2019) resource inadequacies alike Kirmizi and Tosuncuoglu (2019) and personal limitations. To cope with these obstacles, participants mentioned maintaining optimism and patience or seeking supervisors' advice.

Self-perceived limitations primarily involved time constraints, lesson planning issues, and classroom management, concurring with Han and Takkaç-Tulgar's (2019). Excessive use of L1 in the class was another limitation.

Open questions to evaluate Beyond practice received the following responses. Few STs were able to define reflective practice, contradicting findings in previous research (Naseem et al.,2023; Permana et al.,2023). This could be a result of confusing reflective practice with related concepts, as was reported by Nocetti-de-la-Barra et al.(2023).

As areas of improvement, they mainly identified lack of time, also observed in several empirical studies (Ann et al., 2018; Lee, 2023; Shooshtari, et al., 2019; Van et al., 2022). This might represent poor time management or be result of a generalized idea that the system does not allocate enough time for English classes. The participants of the second cohort provided more input, referring to their intent to develop self-confidence; devote more time to preparation of more interactive activities and use of mindfulness and stress management techniques.

A majority of participants (69% in the first cohort, 88% in the second) reported that self-reflection on performance was effortless. However, content analysis revealed a contradiction: many student teachers (STs) engaged only in superficial contemplation of their lessons. This shallow approach likely contributes to their perception of reflection as "easy". This finding aligns with several studies, such as Alsuhaibani (2019), Gudeta (2022), Hutauruk (2024), Nurkamto and Sarosa (2020), and Riyanti (2020).

STs expressed a positive feeling after reflecting on their own teaching practice coinciding with Barham (2023). The participants considered that through reflective practice, they could become better teachers which aligns to Kramer (2018), Körkkö et al. (2016), Mansour Almusharraf (2020), Naseem et al. (2023), and Van et al., (2022). Notwithstanding, this could deliberately intended to please the researcher because it somehow contradicts the lack of depth and critical analysis found in the content examination.

As for the intention of future reflection practice, the mean was 4,77 and 4, 47 respectively, indicating a strong agreement to future reflection in all participants similar to other studies (Altalhab et al. 2020, Alwaheebi, 2022, Kleimola & Leppisaari 2022).

4.2 Content Analysis

4.2.1 E-portfolio



Content analysis of the e-portfolio indicates that student teachers (STs) generally do not engage in serious reflection. Some provided nearly identical responses throughout the fifteen-week period, suggesting lack of interest, aligning with Houde's findings who reported that students who are required to engage in written reflection about their teaching practicum, often write what they suspect their professors want to read (Houde, 2022 p.1486). Mann and Walsh (2017 cited by Ann et al., 2018) cautioned that when reflection is done solely to complete a task, it loses its purpose. In the case of the current investigation, very few instances evidenced development in the mindset of STs that could indicate some evolution which suggests inability to reflect (Ann et al., 2018; Padmanabha, 2023).

STs felt proud of students' engagement in the class; satisfaction with self-performance; and rapport with students. The highlighted aspects were subjective.

The challenges faced during the lessons were predominantly regarding time management and student misbehavior including bad attitude (not paying attention, using their cell phones, being bored), and lack of knowledge or unwillingness to participate, similar to findings by Hutaaruk (2024) and Lee (2023). Additionally, anxiety caused by communication issues while using L2 were mentioned frequently, aligned to Pasaribu et al.'s (2023) findings.

Overall, the findings confirm Ann et al.'s (2018) results where the participants' reflections were lacking judgement and were quite descriptive and heavily focused on lesson planning, classroom management and assessment. Habtamu and Belay (2023) inferred from their results that instructors rarely reflect critically on the broader social aspects surrounding teaching.

4.2.2 Reflective Video

Confirming the above findings, STs' videos focused on practice, coinciding with Ann et al. (2018) and Karlay et al. (2021). Aspects such as analyzing their own performance, having identified some areas for improvement, and the intention of trying to improve in the execution of the lessons were mostly mentioned. Very few discussed teaching principles and even fewer focused on theory. Many explained the reasons why they had decided to become language teachers referring to love for language, their own experience as language students, and environmental influence.

Time management - classroom management were unanimously mentioned as the number one obstacle. Participants primarily expressed concerns about planning, developing contingency strategies, and enhancing the choice of mediation activities. Notably, only one participant extended their reflection to encompass broader social issues, including integration, inclusion, and fostering awareness of empathy and collaboration. This individual demonstrated a more comprehensive analytical approach, considering aspects beyond the immediate and apparent elements of English language instruction.

5. Conclusions

Concurring with other empirical research, this study indicates that preservice teachers seem to have a positive perception of reflection and recognize its importance. STs seem to have a basic understanding of what reflection entails. Nevertheless, results lead to concluding that STs did not demonstrate neither the skills nor the commitment to conduct sustained, in-depth reflective practices while completing their mandatory practicum.

Evidence in the e-portfolio and videos show redundancy and superficiality, demonstrating a lack of commitment to an in-depth introspective process suggesting that STs merely completed a mandatory requirement. Consequently, it is concluded that STs do not engage in reflective practices independently, and appear to be, as Ann et al., (2018) indicated, unprepared to do so.

As for the five reflective dimensions described by Farrell (2019), most STs engage on the practice but disregard the other dimensions.

STs on the second cohort, having been briefly instructed on reflective practice, were more involved and developed better their answers. As Zahid and Khanam (2019) demonstrated, prospective teachers conducted much better reflective practices after training, which resonates with Maksimović and Osmanović's (2019) conclusions.

It is recommended, following Rahimi and Weisi's (2018) conclusion, that reflective practice should be implemented regularly by in-training teachers, and it would be advantageous if the University would provide more training to do so.

It would be a worthwhile venture to pursue further research investigating the experiences of in-service teachers with reflective practice. Such an inquiry could serve to evaluate the regularity with which active English teachers engage in reflective processes, as well as the specific methods they employ to



undertake this endeavor. Additionally, it may prove illuminating to examine any potential correlations between years of teaching experience and the practitioners' propensity for, or approach to, reflective practice.

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