



## Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' professional development needs in educational contexts: Exploring the challenge of reflective practice

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** This study investigated Iranian, English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' attitudes toward reflective teaching compared with their classroom assessment preferences and up-take of strategy-based instruction. It compared their views in the two key higher education provider contexts of the university and institute.

**Methods:** In this cross-sectional correlational study, a total of 90 teachers, half drawn from each university in a major city in Iran, were selected using controlled quota sampling. Data were collected through a four-part survey. Besides gathering demographic data (Part A), the survey drew upon three established instruments that used a Likert Scale format. Part B comprised the *Teacher Reflectivity* questionnaire, and Part C focused on the *Classroom Assessment Preferences Survey Questionnaire for Language Teachers*. Also, part D administered the *Teachers' Beliefs Inventory for Strategy Instruction*. The reliability of this and the CAPSQ-LT was confirmed by the researchers using Cronbach's alpha at 0.842 and 0.951, respectively. A total of 90 questionnaires were distributed, with 72 fully completed (80%) and returned. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was employed to analyze the data, using the independent sample *t*-test and ANOVA. Also, Pearson product-moment correlations were used to measure the association between the variables. A *p*-value less than 0.05 was considered as significant.

**Results:** As shown in findings, a statistically significant and positive correlation was found between the teachers' reflective teaching scores and classroom assessment preference scores ( $r=0.473$ ,  $P=0.001$ ). This correlation was moderately high and positive, thus supporting that higher teacher reflective practices reflect a broader application of classroom assessment. The Table also shows that there was no significant correlation between the teachers' attitudes toward reflective teaching and their uptake of strategy-based instruction ( $r=0.094$ ;  $P=0.434$ ). Similarly, there was no statistically significant correlation between the teachers' attitudes toward classroom assessment preferences and their beliefs about strategy-based instruction ( $r=0.038$ ,  $P=0.752$ ). As shown, no statistically significant difference was observed between the teachers' attitudes toward reflective teaching and their uptake of strategy-based instruction ( $P<0.05$ ).

**Conclusion:** This study draws attention to the need for teachers in EFL contexts, such as this, to have access to professional development opportunities that deeply engage and guide them to be reflective practitioners who can make the connections between assessment techniques, strategy-based instruction, and students' improved language learning outcomes.

**Keywords:** Educational measurement, Education, Decision making, Reflective practice

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Please cite this paper as:

Shokpour N, Eslampanah N, Asadi V, O'Neill S, Dann C, Wang J. Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' professional development needs in educational contexts: Exploring the challenge of reflective practice. *J Adv Med Educ Prof.* 2024;12(4):261-271. DOI: 10.30476/jamp.2024.103180.1995.

Received: 29 June 2024

Accepted: 7 September 2024

## Introduction

Professional development plays a significant role in education and has a crucial impact on student's learning outcomes (1). It is well-recognized that to ensure the quality of language teaching, teachers need to engage in ongoing professional development or professional learning to continue to enhance their practice (2-5) and embrace new developments in the field (6, 7). This has been typically addressed through teachers being made aware of 'good practice' and then modeling their teaching on the concept of the 'expert teacher' (8). However, teachers' access to professional development opportunities may be spasmodic and involve a variety of modes of delivery, such as attendance at workshops, seminars and conferences, formal study, and self-development strategies (9) as well as problem-based learning through action research (10). The latter relies on teachers driving their professional learning by themselves, thus recognizing their agency (11) through self-reflective practice (12).

Bonner, Diehl, and Trachtman found teachers' agentic beliefs were developed when they participated in "highly salient experiences with a potent, visible intervention" (13). Mathew (2012) indicates that because "the practice of reflection involves critical examination of self-motivation and thinking a move towards critical thinking [should] improve productivity in teaching and students' learning" (14). Teachers' attitudes are, therefore, seen as stemming from their pedagogical beliefs, thus reflecting their perspective on what they view as constituting effective teaching (15). Their pedagogical repertoires, therefore, are influenced by the attitudes, knowledge, and assumptions they hold (16). When taken together these are seen as providing teachers' pedagogical schemata, where attitudes provide the basis for their systematic justification of the way they act in their practice, e.g., planning, pedagogical approach, and assessing. Moreover, they can also affect the way teachers make pedagogical decisions and dictate their design or choice of approach, and so ultimately influence the success and failure of what is taught or learned in the classroom (16, 17). On this basis, language teachers' attitudes and understanding of instructional practices and pedagogical decision-making, as well as students' learning, play a major role when considering approaches to professional development.

In the Iranian context, research has shown that although teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) participate in professional development, it has limited impact on their

practice since it is more likely to be linked to their need to fulfill regulatory compliance requirements (18, 19). Nevertheless, a study in 2017 found that Iranian EFL teachers recognized that they needed to improve both their pedagogical and assessment knowledge and that their current in-service training required to include opportunities for interaction and collaboration, including peer observation, and connections to actual practice (20). This bodes well with Schön's (1984) model which highlights how teachers should be able to think reflectively about their teaching practices, including before, during, and after a lesson (21). In addition, Uştuk and de Costa (2021) confirmed EFL teachers' reflective practice should involve the 'meta-actions' they take during the lesson, such that their critical thinking about their teaching increases their awareness of their pedagogy, thus adding to their capacity to analyze practices and self-assess (22). This was also seen as helping them develop their teaching agency by building their confidence and skills to help them transform their practice. In the same vein, it is crucial for research to consider not only teachers' actual instructional practices, including assessment, but as Gao and Zhou (2021) note, the complexity of their internal introspection if they are to modify and improve their beliefs and practice systems (23). Thus, the underpinning theoretical framework for the present study is grounded in the literature on critical reflection in teacher education, as well as the communicative pedagogical approach (24), acknowledging social constructivism in terms of teacher-student/s communicative interactions and the making of meaning (25).

## Literature Review

A growing body of research has investigated teachers' attitudes towards professional development (26) besides the practice of reflective teaching (27, 28), with some focusing on exploring the impact on teachers' professional learning when these two experiences are pedagogically connected (29), that is when reflective practice is the strategy adopted within a professional development experience (13).

## Reflective Practice

Reflective practice is considered a key part of teachers' ongoing professional development and has received noticeable attention in initial teacher education as well as some in-service training initiatives (30, 31). Farrell defined reflective practice as "a cognitive process accompanied by a set of attitudes in which teachers systematically collect data about their practice, and, while engaging in

dialogue with others, use the data to make informed decisions about their practice both inside and outside the classroom" (32). Importantly, Oo, Magyar, and Habók (2021) found teachers' reflection on the instructional context had a statistically significant impact on raising students' reading comprehension achievement, thus reinforcing the need for research to further illuminate the relationship between teachers' pedagogy and assessment, and the reflective process (33).

### *The Challenges for Implementing Reflective Practice in Iran*

Studies on reflective practice and the status of reflectivity in Iran have shown that Iranian teachers are generally reflective (34, 35). However, given that novice teachers and others (36), regardless of the length of teaching experience (35), may be unaware of the underlying principles of reflective practice, and their relevance to improving pedagogy, it is important to consider teachers' current attitudes and practice to be able to design professional development opportunities for pedagogical change (32, 37). Similarly, the influence of government policy has meant syllabus is implemented from the 'top-down' in a context of 'one-model-fits-all', which discourages, disempowers, and disables the provision of effective professional development activities (1, 38). Recent research has also identified related issues emerging from this situation that may be detrimental to adopting reflective practices. These include EFL teacher predictability and burnout (39, 40), EFL teacher recruitment policies (41), and limitations of learning resources, e.g. textbooks (1, 42, 43). Thus, in light of the current complexity associated with the implementation of reflective practice, deeper insights into the attitudes, practices, and views of EFL teachers themselves would seem necessary to design the most appropriate professional development.

### *Reflective Practice and the Role of Assessment*

Assessment plays a central role in the teaching and learning process and measurement of students' placement and growth in proficiency in EFL and must be designed to produce data that are helpful for teachers' ongoing planning and pedagogy, besides being able to indicate that proficiency goals have been met. However, as Ashraf and Zolfaghari point out, to be effective, EFL teachers need to be 'language assessment literate'. Language assessment literacy (LAL) encompasses an understanding of the different purposes and forms of assessment and the issues that impact the validity and reliability of results (44). However, recent research has found that

Iranian EFL teachers may lack this literacy and are more likely to see assessment as mainly summative, through examinations and the like, despite recent assessment policy reform (44-46). Thus, teachers should be skilled to be able to gather data on both the effectiveness of their pedagogy and students' needs to be able to move learning forward (47). However, to be reflective practitioners, teachers also need to understand the rationale for utilizing assessment to improve pedagogy and learning and acquire knowledge and skills to put it into practice. However, Janesar, Khodabakhshzadeh, and Motallebzadeh's review (2020) reinforce that Iranian EFL teachers lack 'hands-on' experience and training in assessment, including in the use of technology, thus adding further support to the need to explore the relationships between teachers' attitudes, and teaching and assessment practices (48).

### *Strategy-based Instruction*

Strategy-based instruction focuses on the strategic training of language learners through incorporating both learning and communicative strategies into the regular language curriculum (49). In the Iranian context, both teachers and students have been found to support its use across the macro skills (50, 51). As a pedagogy, it supports explicit teaching, for example concerning developing critical thinking skills (52), designing speaking tasks (53), and improving reading comprehension (54). Strategy-based instruction involves students learning when, why, and how to apply specific techniques and processes in their target language use. It also allows for more complex skills to be acquired and broken down into sub-skills, thus fostering sequential learning.

This is further complicated by Iranian EFL teachers being insufficiently prepared to address the increasing demand to teach students from linguistic and culturally diverse backgrounds, e.g. minority groups such as Azeris, Kurds, Baluchis, and Arabs (24, 55). Thus, it is timely to focus more deeply on teachers' reflective practice and how it relates to assessment preferences and strategy-based instruction in seeking to illuminate how best to inform teachers' professional development needs. This research, therefore, sought to answer the following research question:

What do EFL teachers' attitudes towards the key instructional variables of reflective teaching practice, strategy-based instruction, and classroom assessment practices mean for their professional development needs?

## **Methods**

A cross-sectional analytical study was

conducted to verify whether there was a relationship between a sample of Iranian EFL teachers' attitudes towards the three key pedagogical-related variables of reflective teaching, assessment preferences, and strategy-based instruction. As a case study, it also compared the attitudes of the EFL teachers in the two education provider types of universities and institutes. Data were collected as a survey, which provided both descriptive and numerical comparative information and allowed for statistical comparison of these two groups' responses.

The comparison between provider types was important since university lecturers who teach English are usually PhD holders, but those who teach in institutes are mostly freelance teachers who hold Bachelor's or Master's degrees in EFL, thus suggesting there may be differences in attitudes towards their work. In addition, the research design allowed for the variation in students' goals for learning English according to provider type. For instance, a university provider is typically selected by students who need to acquire English at a high level of proficiency e.g., IELTS levels for working in the professions, and including internationally, whereas courses in an institute are designed for students who need English for specific purposes (ESP), where outcomes' proficiency would typically be at a more vocational or pre-intermediate level.

### Participants

A total of 72 EFL teachers participated in the research with 36 selected from four universities and 36 from four institutes. Based on the total number of teachers in both universities and language centers' teachers, we used the Cochran table to estimate the number of participants, which was estimated at 90. We listed the names of the universities and institutes in the city with the number of their teachers; then, owing to the limitation of access to the full population of EFL teachers, controlled quota sampling was used to invite EFL teachers from available classes who were generally representative of the profession and were experienced and knowledgeable in the subject matter, so in this type of sampling, given the aims of the study and inclusion and exclusion criteria, restrictions are imposed on the researcher's choice of samples. In this non-probability sampling method, researchers create a convenience sample in which individuals who represent a population are involved. These individuals are selected using specific traits or qualities.

Although EFL teachers in both universities and institutes are applied linguists, since their

language program goals are known to differ according to purpose, proficiency goals, and integration of work practices into students' studies, the research was designed to illuminate whether the two groups would differ in their attitudes toward reflective teaching, and their approaches to assessment and use of strategy-based instruction. The inclusion criteria were an experience of teaching English for about 2 years, willingness to participate in the study, and Iranian nationality. The exclusion criterion was the unwillingness to cooperate in the study. After the distribution of the questionnaires, only 72 of them returned.

The project adhered to ethical guidelines and requirements where EFL teachers were invited to participate and were fully informed about the purpose of the study. They were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses, with their formal consent being recorded. It was also explained that the results would only report group data and no individuals would be identified.

### Data collection instruments

Data were collected through a four-part survey in English since all the instructors were proficient in the English language. Besides gathering demographic data (Part A), the survey drew upon three established instruments that used a Likert Scale format. Part B comprised the *Teacher Reflectivity* questionnaire developed by Akbari, Behzadpour, and Dadvand containing 29 items (reliability index, 0.91 (56)), and Part C focused on the *Classroom Assessment Preferences Survey Questionnaire for Language Teachers (CAPSQ-LT)* (57) where participants rated their frequency of use of 35 items. Then, the final Part D administered the *Teachers' Beliefs Inventory for Strategy Instruction* developed by Oxford (58), which contained 25 items (Cronbach's Alpha;  $\alpha=0.828$ ), as estimated by Bedir (59). The reliability of this questionnaire and the CAPSQ-LT was confirmed by the researchers using Cronbach's alpha at 0.842 and 0.951, respectively. Given the length of the survey package, to ensure participants had sufficient time to answer all items, they were allowed to complete it at home and return it to the researchers after three days. The duration of the overall process was two months. A total of 90 surveys were distributed, with 72 fully completed (80%) and returned.

### Data analysis

The survey data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 16, producing descriptive statistics for each variable: teacher reflectivity, classroom

assessment preferences, and strategy-based assessment for the combined group. Then, the statistical tests applied were the independent sample *t*-test. Also, Pearson product-moment correlations were used to measure the association between the variables.

### Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval of the present study was obtained. The research project has been approved by the ethics committee of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences (SUMS). This is not a clinical trial. All participants agreed to participate in the study and informed consent was obtained from all of them. No identifying images or personal data of the participants are presented. All the procedures followed in this study were in accordance with the declaration of Helsinki.

### Results

Table 1 shows an overview of the participants' educational qualifications, teaching experience, and gender.

The combined total of 72 EFL participants was generally representative of the EFL teacher profession in terms of gender, educational background, and years of teaching experience. These data also showed that the key demographics

of teachers from each provider type were similar. Each group, university and institute, showed that the majority of teachers were highly experienced with almost two-thirds having taught EFL for six years or more. Similarly, only approximately a fifth of participants in each group had less than two years' experience. In addition, there was also general comparability in qualifications with three-quarters of the total sample holding a BA or MA in English and a minority with non-English degrees or PhD.

Table 2 displays the results of the Pearson correlation between the teachers' attitudes toward reflective teaching, classroom assessment preferences, and strategy-based instruction.

As shown in Table 2, a statistically significant and positive correlation was found between the teachers' reflective teaching scores and classroom assessment preference scores ( $r=0.473$ ,  $P=0.001$ ). This correlation was moderately high and positive, thus supporting that higher teacher reflective practices reflect a broader application of classroom assessment. The Table also shows that there was no significant correlation between the teachers' attitudes toward reflective teaching and their uptake of strategy-based instruction ( $r=0.094$ ;  $P=0.434$ ). Similarly, there was no statistically significant correlation between the

**Table 1:** EFL teachers' demographics

| Background information       | Statistic         | Total group |        | University |        | Institutes |        |
|------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|--------|------------|--------|------------|--------|
|                              |                   | <i>f</i>    | %      | <i>f</i>   | %      | <i>f</i>   | %      |
| Gender                       | Male              | 34          | 47.22% | 16         | 44%    | 18         | 50%    |
|                              | Female            | 38          | 52.77% | 20         | 56%    | 18         | 50%    |
|                              | Total             | 72          | 100%   | 36         | 100%   | 36         | 100%   |
| Years of teaching experience | Less than 2 years | 15          | 20.83% | 8          | 22.20% | 7          | 19.40% |
|                              | 3-5 years         | 13          | 18.05% | 7          | 19.40% | 6          | 16.60% |
|                              | 6-8 years         | 7           | 9.72%  | 3          | 8.30%  | 4          | 11.10% |
|                              | More than 8 years | 37          | 51.38% | 18         | 50.00% | 19         | 52.70% |
|                              | Total             | 72          |        | 36         | 100%   | 36         | 100%   |
| Most Recent Qualification    | Non-English       | 7           | 9.72%  | 4          | 11.11% | 3          | 8.33%  |
|                              | BA in English     | 18          | 25%    | 9          | 25.00% | 9          | 25.00% |
|                              | MA in English     | 35          | 48.61% | 17         | 47.22% | 18         | 50.00% |
|                              | PHD in English    | 12          | 16.66% | 6          | 16.60% | 6          | 36.55% |
|                              | Total             | 72          | 100%   | 36         | 100%   | 36         | 100%   |

\**f* is the number of teachers in each category.

**Table 2:** Results of Pearson correlations between the teachers' attitudes toward reflective teaching, classroom assessment preferences, and strategy-based instruction

|                      |                     | Classroom assessment | Strategy-based instruction |
|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|
| Reflective teaching  | Pearson correlation | 0.473**              | 0.094                      |
|                      | Significance        | 0.001                | 0.434                      |
|                      | N                   | 72                   | 72                         |
| Classroom assessment | Pearson correlation |                      | 0.038                      |
|                      | Significance        |                      | 0.752                      |
|                      | N                   | 72                   | 72                         |

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

**Table 3:** Independent sample t-test for university and institute teachers

| Variables                  | t-test for equality of means |              |              |       |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|--------------|-------|
|                            | t                            | Institutes   | University   | P     |
| Reflective teaching        | 0.522                        | 96.22±18.15  | 94.17±15.13  | 0.603 |
| Classroom assessment       | 0.678                        | 127.11±29.99 | 131.13±19.20 | 0.500 |
| Strategy-based instruction | 2.848                        | 73.61±9.03   | 81.16±13.10  | 0.006 |

teachers' attitudes toward classroom assessment preferences and their beliefs about strategy-based instruction ( $r = 0.038$ ,  $P = 0.752$ ).

Given the correlation between the EFL teachers' reflective teaching and assessment preferences, an independent samples *t*-test was applied to compare the two groups' attitudes toward reflective teaching.

As shown in Table 3, strategy-based instruction was significantly different among university and institute teachers ( $t = 2.848$ ;  $P = 0.006$ ). In this regard, the mean of institute teachers was 73.61 and that of the university teachers was 81.16, indicating the statistically significant difference between them, with university teachers outperforming the institute teachers in terms of strategy-based instruction. The results of this test also showed that there was no statistically significant difference between university and institute teachers in reflective teaching ( $t = 0.522$ ;  $P = 0.603$ ) and classroom assessment ( $t = 0.678$ ;  $P = 0.500$ ).

## Discussion

Overall, the result of the survey data, collected from the 72 EFL teachers and evenly distributed across the selected universities and institutes, showed that teachers who indicated a high level of reflective practice also reported they adopted more appropriate assessment techniques according to the CAPSQ-LT. However, while there was no correlation between their reflective practice and use of strategy-based instruction, the university teachers were found to adopt strategy-based instruction as a pedagogy, statistically significantly more than their institute counterparts, thus raising issues regarding teachers' reflective practice about their pedagogical decision-making, and the contrasting provider contexts. These findings are further discussed below.

### *EFL teachers' attitudes toward reflective teaching and their classroom assessment preferences*

Considering assessment data is an important part of reflective teaching, such that teachers' assessment literacy is necessary to inform their reflective practice. This relies on their compilation and access to appropriate data that can support

such critical self-evaluation. In turn, this research reinforces the importance of teachers' pedagogical knowledge and attitudes as having a strong influence on their pedagogical approach. Finding a medium to high correlation between the teachers' attitudes toward reflective teaching and their classroom assessment preferences reinforces Farrell's stance that reflective practitioners evaluate the consequences of their actions in the classrooms, i.e. students' learning outcomes, and try to find appropriate solutions to improve success (60). Thus, these findings confirm the importance of both teachers' need to reflect on their classroom practice and their approach to assessment as a gauge for the effectiveness of their teaching. It is important, therefore, for teachers to not only be aware of how they use the results of assessment of students' learning to inform their pedagogical approach but also understand the forms of assessment that can provide appropriate feedback.

### *EFL teachers' attitudes toward reflective teaching and their use of strategy-based instruction*

The fact that the research did not find a statistically significant correlation between the EFL teachers' attitudes towards reflective teaching and their adoption of strategy-based instruction is a concern. This contrasts with the teachers acknowledging the importance of their assessment practices concerning their reflection, thus suggesting a potential gap in their understanding of the role of such data about strategy-based instruction. On the other hand, there may be other reasons for the teachers' apparent lack of recognition of the relationship between students' potential to improve their English proficiency as a result of acquiring and using language learning strategies. The teachers are generally working in a more prescriptive learning environment; this may mean they are resigned to the subsequent restrictive pedagogy and may not see any necessity to change. Nevertheless, since strategy-based instruction represents a key part of these EFL teachers' pedagogical approach, it would be logical for reflective practitioners to assess both students' knowledge, and strategies and skills as part of formative assessment.

### *EFL teachers' attitudes toward strategy-based instruction and classroom assessment preferences*

Since the relationship between teachers' attitudes towards strategy-based instruction and their classroom assessment preferences was weak, with no statistically significant correlation, this also suggests a possible gap in teachers' knowledge in being able to make this connection. For instance, as noted earlier, it would be expected that reflective practitioners would link their assessment to the strategies focused upon to enable students to improve their English proficiency. In this case, the research suggests that the teachers may lack assessment literacy and may not be engaged in assessment in this way if a prescriptive syllabus is in use and the assessment is summative in examination or test format. In addition, as noted earlier, this also bears out the call for EFL teachers needing professional development regarding formative assessment practices that can feed forward (as opposed to summative tests) to assess gains in language proficiency. However, this result suggests these teachers, as Han and Kaya found, may frequently rely upon the use of their personal assessment preferences and may not change them regardless of their classroom experience and knowledge (61). In addition, Sahragard and Saberi's research showed that Iranian EFL teachers tended to rely more on their own experiences and capacities rather than any external guides and support from professional development (62). Thus, these findings support the need for teachers to learn how to explicitly teach the strategies that enhance students' strategy knowledge, use, and acquisition of L2 skills, such as reading, writing, and oral proficiency, and to enable them, as assessment literate professionals, to better understand how pedagogical choices impact their assessment techniques. It may also be argued that although it is well established that teachers' attitudes underlie their instructional practices, the lack of a statistically significant correlation between teachers' strategy-based instruction and their reflective practice implies that these teachers' attitudes regarding the effectiveness of strategy instruction may not necessarily be facilitating a reflective practice approach.

### *Implications for university and institute EFL teachers' professional development*

Being able to compare university and institute EFL teachers' attitudes toward reflective teaching, concerning their classroom assessment preferences and strategy-based instruction was also revealing in suggesting how the purpose

of the actual language program may influence teachers striving to improve their pedagogy. The fact that the university teachers applied strategy-based instruction statistically significantly more than institute teachers may be explained by the university EFL course requiring students to achieve higher proficiency levels. With institute language programs tending to be more vocationally orientated, it is plausible that the institute teachers may be under less pressure to change their pedagogy and assessment, thus making the adoption of reflective teaching less relevant. Therefore, these findings imply that heightened stakes for students to achieve positive EFL proficiency outcomes may influence the need for teachers to focus on data and adopt reflective practice, and in this context, strategy-based instruction. However, caution is drawn as to the study limitations regarding the relatively small sample size given the high population of EFL teachers in Iran, although the teacher sample involved four typical universities and four institutes in a major city. In addition, collection of wider data, such as teachers' attitudes towards their professional development needs, may have further illuminated their views. Future research would also benefit from inclusion of interviews to provide deeper insights into teachers' knowledge and professional learning and professional development approaches in relation to the research question.

Nevertheless, as the concept of reflective teaching refers to the extent to which teachers reflect on their teaching experience and practices in the classroom to be responsible for taking control of their teaching and improving the students' learning outcomes, the evidence from this study concludes that the EFL teachers' reflective teaching had a significant and positive relationship with their classroom assessment preferences, such that their utilization of reflective teaching should help them improve their classroom assessment practice and assessment literacy. As highlighted by Masoch and Stain, by practicing critical reflection, societal issues impacting teaching can be uncovered, personal attitudes become evidence-based rather than grounded in assumptions, and teachers can more appropriately contribute to a diverse student population (63). The present research highlights how reflectivity and assessment are two indispensable parts of a teacher's pedagogical approach, such that their correlation represented a strength of the participants' current practice and provided a possible platform on which to build through future professional development. Of course, as According to Asamoah et al. (2023),

we need to remember that teachers' classroom assessment is a person-centered and situated practice for groups of instructors in their specific environment, rather than a common approach applicable to all teachers (64).

In addition, since reflective teaching and classroom assessment were found to be statistically significantly related, it is suggested that these two features should be further investigated to ensure effective preparation in teacher pre-service and in-service professional development. They are vital in facilitating teachers' effective practice inside the classroom, where the compilation of assessment data provides a basis for teachers' self-reflection on their pedagogy and practices.

The final nexus between the variables of this study was the lack of a relationship between teachers' classroom assessment preferences and strategy-based instruction. This confirms other recent research that suggested Iranian EFL teachers lacked planning skills and were more likely to be more traditional in their pedagogical approach owing to lack of assessment literacy and also the tools, resources and specific assessment criteria (65). In a prescriptive pedagogical environment, the demand for teachers' reflective practice may seem unnecessary to the teachers involved since they probably have limited freedom or incentive to change their practice. Since it was found that strategy-based instruction was not correlated with the other variables under study, i.e., reflective teaching and classroom assessment preferences, it raises the issue of EFL teachers' need to be aware of the significant role of strategies in language learning and teaching and importantly assessment of learning outcomes and accumulated student data. The ability to explicitly teach language learning strategies ultimately remains a valid way for teachers to improve the effectiveness of their classroom practices. In the same line with our findings, Balouchzadeh in her study (2023) highlights that teachers can change their attitude and enhance their awareness through the application of reflective teaching, so that they benefit from their professional development as teachers (66). However, there are some challenges in this way for Iranian EFL teachers, as revealed by Tahimash et al. (2024). They assert that Iranian EFL teachers encounter several challenges in engaging with professional development programs, including the necessity for innovative and current initiatives, an emphasis on practical application, financial limitations, and the need for high-quality facilitation (67).

In keeping with Wei et al.'s (2009) work, it is suggested that a collaborative approach should be adopted where professional development can

be ongoing and linked to practice as this can enhance teachers' attitudes toward teaching outcomes and promote collegiality (68). As recent studies suggest, in this rapidly changing educational environment, teachers should be encouraged to update their skills to provide the best possible education for their students; to this end, Mansouri Nejad et al. (2019) conclude and highly suggest that teachers should try to have consistent cooperation with classroom testing researchers since it is the teacher who identifies the practical problems in the assessment of the students, while testing researchers account for finding scientific answers to such problems (69). Effective teacher training helps educators stay informed about new teaching methodologies, technological advancements, and evolving educational standards (70). According to the recommendations of Alinejad et al. in their 2023 study, language educators should emphasize the integration of reflective thinking and teaching strategies as these elements significantly influence the effectiveness of teaching methods (71).

## Conclusion

This study draws attention to the need for teachers in EFL contexts, such as this, to have access to professional development opportunities that deeply engage and guide them to be reflective practitioners who can make the connections between assessment techniques, strategy-based instruction, and students' improved language learning outcomes.

Overall, while the study has the potential to offer valuable insights into the professional development needs of Iranian EFL teachers and the challenges of implementing reflective practice, careful consideration of its limitations is essential for fully understanding and applying the findings. These insights can lead to more effective professional development programs tailored to the specific needs of teachers in the context. As the present research highlights, there is a need to regularly review professional development policies to ensure their currency in being able to meet both teachers' pedagogical needs and make connections to theoretical underpinnings and vice versa. Moreover, due to cultural, educational, and institutional differences, the findings may not be generalizable to EFL teachers in other countries or even to all EFL teachers within Iran. While examining reflective practice is important, the study may overlook other crucial aspects of professional development, such as access to resources, institutional support, or curriculum development, which also play significant roles in teachers' professional growth. Therefore,



future research could expand the scope to include students' attitudes on assessment and instructional strategies, longitudinal studies to explore the variations over time, or comparative studies across different educational systems.

### Acknowledgments

We would like to sincerely thank all the students who participated in this study by accurately completing the questionnaires and taking part in the interview sessions.

### Conflict of Interest

Nasrin Shokrpour, as the English Editor, was not involved in the peer-review and decision making processes for this manuscript. A team of independent experts were formed by the Editorial Board to review the article without her knowledge.

### Authors' Contribution

All authors designed and developed the concept. NSh and VA wrote the main manuscript text. NE collected the data, analyzed the data, and approved the final draft. ShO, CHD, and JW revised the manuscript, commented on the analysis of the data, and changed many parts. All authors reviewed and approved the manuscript.

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