



Uncovering the Gaps: Pre-service EFL Teachers' Understanding of Reflective Practice

Descubriendo las Brechas: Comprensión de la Práctica Reflexiva en Docentes de Inglés en Formación



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Abstract

The impact of reflection in teachers' professional development has been widely acknowledged. Yet, not much is known about the perception that EFL pre-service teachers have about reflective practice. The present study attempts to address this gap by investigating how EFL pre-service teachers reflect on their performance. Employing a mixed approach, the study involved 43 teacher candidates who were taking the Practicum at a private university in Costa Rica. The findings show that student teachers seem to lack comprehension about what reflective practice is. They demonstrated little engagement on deep and serious reflection and lack of critical analysis of their own performance, even though they seem to acknowledge the importance of reflection. More training on how to reflect appropriately is needed to create a permanent reflective practice among EFL teachers and encourage a life-long commitment to reflective practice as a means for professional development.

Keywords

Reflective practice, pre-service EFL teachers, professional development, critical reflection

Resumen

El impacto de la reflexión para el desarrollo profesional de los docentes ha sido ampliamente reconocido. Sin embargo, no se sabe mucho sobre la percepción de los futuros profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) acerca de la práctica reflexiva. El presente estudio intenta abordar esta brecha investigando cómo los futuros profesores de inglés reflexionan sobre su desempeño docente. Empleando un enfoque mixto, el estudio involucró a 43 estudiantes que estaban realizando su práctica en una universidad privada en Costa Rica. Los hallazgos muestran que los practicantes carecen de conocimiento sobre la práctica reflexiva ya que mostraron poco compromiso con una reflexión profunda y escaso análisis crítico de su propio desempeño, aunque parecen reconocer la importancia de la reflexión. Se necesita más capacitación sobre prácticas reflexivas para fomentar un compromiso permanente con la práctica reflexiva como medio para el desarrollo profesional.

Palabras clave

Práctica reflexiva, formación inicial EFL, desarrollo profesional, reflexión crítica

1. Introduction

The teaching profession is undoubtedly a challenging and multifaceted undertaking. Not only linguistic expertise is necessary, but also a comprehensive understanding of educational theories, empathy, and a commitment to continuous learning. Language teaching is "a lifelong endeavor and a way of being" (Nurkamto & Sarosa, 2020 p.46).

Research evidences the plethora of advantages of reflective teaching (Cirocki & Farrell, 2017; Machost & Stains, 2023; Moti, 2022; Permana et al., 2023; Rahnama, et al., 2016; Slade et al., 2019; Tuncer & Özkan, 2021), including that it prompts decision-making, enhances problem solving skills, and develops critical thinking in addition to enabling the identification of areas for improvement (Geneva, 2018). It also creates awareness of learners' cultural differences leading to the creation of more inclusive learning environments (Chaika, 2023). Furthermore, Dexter and Wall (2021) indicated that more reflective teachers view themselves as self-efficacious, thus preventing potential burnout development.

Despite the general acceptance, Ningsih and Lengkanawati (2023) consider that there is currently a scarcity of empirical research in this field. Furthermore, Padmanabha (2023) suggested that research about the use of reflective journals in pre-service teachers conveyed mixed results, recommending further investigation.

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. What do pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers think about reflective practice and its impact on their professional development?
2. How comfortable are the future EFL teachers reflecting about themselves as individuals and as educators?
3. What do preservice teachers reflect about?
4. What is the likelihood that English student teachers (STs) follow a permanent reflective practice through their teaching experience?

2. Literary Review

2.1. Reflective practice

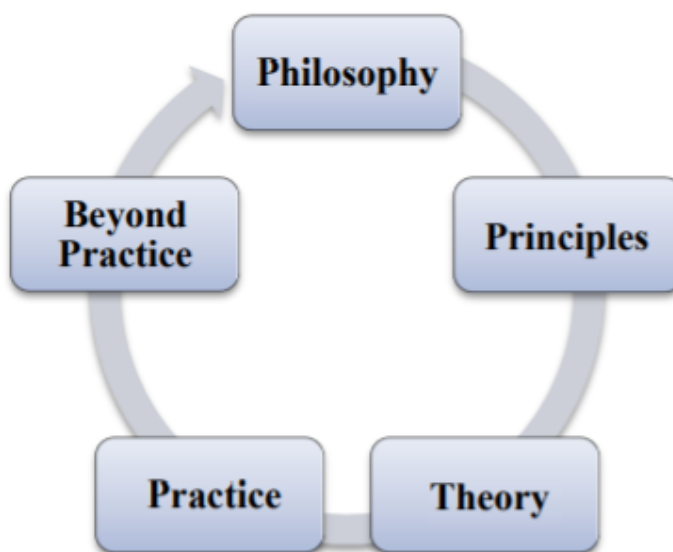
Closely related to permanent professional development is the constant reflection on one's performance. Reflective practice was defined by Finlay (2008) as 'learning through and from experience' which allows gaining new perspective not only about one self but also about one's way of pursuing education, thus impacting quality of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2021).

Farrell (2023) argues that reflective practices are much more than taking a few minutes to think about teaching. Furthermore, Soodmand and Farahani, (2018) claim that reflective thinking is organized and regular; follows a pattern of thought and action (Salih & Omar, 2022), and is characterized by its flexibility (Salih & Omar, 2022). "Reflective practice is more than a method, it is really a way of life" (Farrell, 2023 p. 136).

Many authors have agreed that encouraging teachers to think critically about their beliefs and actions is an excellent contributor to professional development (Alwaheebi, 2022; Cirocki & Farrell, 2017; Farrell, 2019; Farrell & Macapinlac, 2021; Filipi, 2022; Habtamu & Belay, 2023; Körkkö, et al. 2016; Lu, 2021; Slade, et al., 2019). Li et al. (2023) propose that teachers who analyze critically their work have better performance. In many countries nowadays reflective practice is considered a requisite in pre-service teacher education programs (Kılıç, 2022).

Figure 1

Framework for reflecting on practice (Farrell, 2015)



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

1. **Philosophy:** involves teachers thinking of themselves as a person not just an educator, prodding on how their background (e.g. social class, education, family values, religion, among other aspects) and past experiences influence their perspectives on teaching and learning (Alvarado Gutierrez et al., 2019).
2. **Principles** are the beliefs teachers possess about the acquisition of the language (Alvarado Gutierrez et al., 2019). This is relevant because frequently individuals take these for granted (Farrell, 2019) or ignore them.
3. **Theory** is related to the linguistic knowledge and how it should be transmitted. These theories translate into the selection of techniques, activities and methods used (Alvarado Gutierrez et al. 2019). When teachers reflect on the theory they have learned, they can determine if it can be transferred to real life classroom practice (Farrell, 2019).
4. **Practice** refers to a teacher's observable behavior either during or after the teaching episode. *Reflection-in-action* defined by Schön (1983, cited in Al-Amrani, 2021) considers any incident occurring during the lesson. If the analysis is done after the teaching episode, it is termed *reflection-on-action* (Schön 1983 as cited in Al-Amrani, 2021). Reflection-in-action refers to the ability to deal with classroom situations as they occur, while reflection-on-action involves post-hoc reflection and it requires a deeper analysis that allows possible preparation on how to address differently similar instances in the future (Schön, 1983 cited in Al-Amrani, 2021).

5. Beyond practice or *reflection-for-action* (Chien, 2013 cited in Cirocki & Farrell, 2017), refers to a broader, critical reflection to transform practices in a way that responds to the students' and society's needs (Alvarado Gutierrez et al. 2019).

There are several means in which teachers can record their reflections: teacher journals, collaborative blogging, post-observation conferences, peer sharing, portfolios, videos and action research, among others (Farrell, 2023; Karlay et al., 2022). Another useful method is a report where teachers describe the main features of the lesson, time spent on each part, and how effective it was (Gudeta, 2022).

For this investigation, the Student Teachers (STs) were requested to keep e-portfolios as part of the practicum's evaluation. As defined by Tuncer and Özkan (2021), an E-portfolio is a collection of work that displays the learning of students in an electronic format which may serve as a valuable learning tool and contribute to teacher training programs.

The other means for reflective practice chosen was video. According to Tuncer and Özkan (2021), the use of video has gained popularity to delve into the performance of language educators through a critical perspective. Traditional use of video involves examining recordings of the class execution. In the present study the video was recorded by STs, following several prompts promoting in-depth thinking, after the conclusion of the practicum.

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 (Bonilla Medina & Samacá Bohórquez, 2020) because it prepares them for authentic teaching and learning environments (Barham, 2023), providing opportunities to experience hands on the classroom realities, which frequently do not align with the learnt theory (Aghabarari & Rahimi, 2020). "Most scholars consider that practicum sessions play a fundamental role in helping pre-service teachers to form personal theories in their initial teacher education process" (Kirmizi & Tosuncuoglu, 2019 p.1).

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 the collaborating institution.

For the first time, 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 in the first session of the Practicum. In addition to the e-portfolio, the video was included in the evaluation schema.

The host institutions were all high schools from public and private sectors, mostly located in urban areas near or in the capital city.

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; in the first group 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 informed consent. Reflections after each class were mandatory and graded. For the second group, videos were also graded.

3.2.2. Data collection procedures.

Quantitative data were gathered through a digital questionnaire consisting of demographic information, 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 that each participant was required to prepare.

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 a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019).

4. Results, discussion and conclusions

4.1 Questionnaire results

Table 1

Demographic information of the participants

Criterion	Cohort 1			Cohort 2		
Gender	Male	Female	Prefer not to say	Male	Female	Prefer not to say
	17%	83%	0	43%	57%	0
Age mean	27			30		
Previous teaching experience	Yes	No		Yes	No	
	62%	38%		60%	40%	
N= 13				N= 30		

As observed, in the first cohort female STs prevailed and the mean of the participants' age is 27 years old while in the second one, the male-female ratio is closer to the general population. The age mean is slightly higher, 30 years. In relation to prior teaching experience, results were similar.

Table 2

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	2,923	0,917	3.60	0.95

method				
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	

Background as a variable affecting teaching performance received in the first cohort a high appraisal, similar to findings by Farrell and Avejik (2021). The mean in the second group corresponds to a neutral position. This discrepancy could be explained by age, or by gender distribution. 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 akin to Farrell and Avejik (2021).

In the second dimension, the results show discrepancies. Perception towards revision of teaching principles tends to a neutral stance in the first cohort while the second group praised it as high. Yet, the item related to a change in STs' vision of teaching as a result of reflective practice was highly valued, indicating that there is an impact resulting from examining teaching principles.

The theoretical aspect received mixed perceptions across groups, one as neutral and high appraisal in the other. Aghabarari and Rahimi (2020) confirmed theoretical and practical aspects that contribute to teacher trainees' attitudes. This reflects the ongoing debate between adhering to specific teaching methods (Sarifa, 2020) and adopting a more flexible approach (Abramova & Mashoshina, 2021; Farrel & Avejik, 2021). Conversely, theory-based material selection was highly valued, aligning with Farrel and Avejik's (2021) findings.

In the practice dimension, post-lesson reflection received high appraisal, likely due to its inclusion in the e-portfolio. However, content analysis revealed incomplete or superficial reflections. To further explore this aspect, three additional open-ended questions were incorporated.

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) which highlight this as one of the most pressing issues. Other challenges included managing 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 mentioned by Kirmizi and Tosuncuoglu (2019), and STs additionally mentioned personal limitations.

Coping strategies encompassed maintaining optimism and patience, aligning with Han and Takkaç-Tulgar's (2019) findings. Some sought supervisor advice similar to Novitasari and Murtafi'ah (2022), while others reported discouragement (Nanaban & Amalia, 2021). Overall, participants indicated relative ease in overcoming obstacles, consistent with findings on diverse coping mechanisms (Novitasari & Murtafi'ah, 2022; Pasaribu et al., 2023).

Self-perceived limitations primarily involved time constraints, lesson planning issues,

and classroom management challenges, concurring with Ann et al. (2018). There seems to be a pattern of insecurity about aspects related to the planning and execution of a lesson, probably resulting from inexperience. Language skill improvement was acknowledged by participants, kindred to Shoostari et al. (2019). One notable issue was the acceptance of frequent utilization of L1, based on the apprehension of misunderstanding, a phenomenon also observed by Kirmizi and Tosuncuoglu (2019) and Tuncer and Özkan (2021). Most participants did not respond regarding corrective actions, aligning with Ann et al.'s (2018) observations on limited post-practice reflection. This suggests a tendency towards superficial analysis, focusing on circumstantial elements rather than in-depth reflection, also noted by Alsuhaibani (2019), Gudeta (2022), and Hutaaruk (2024), which indicates lack of expertise in reflective teaching. This aligns with Karlay et al.'s (2021) findings showing that EFL teachers predominantly reflect on affective domain aspects and do not consider other aspects indicated by Farrell (2015).

Open questions included in the instrument to evaluate Beyond practice received the following responses:

1. “What do you understand as reflecting on the teaching practice?”

Few STs were able to clearly define reflective practice, contradicting findings by Naseem et al. (2023) and Permana et al. (2023). The STs ambiguity might be a consequence of confusing reflective practice with related concepts, similar to what Nocetti-de-la-Barra et al.(2023) reported.

2. When asked about areas of improvement, lack of time prevailed being identified by half of the respondents, also observed in several empirical studies (Ann et al., 2018; Lee, 2023; Shoostari, et al., 2019; Van et al., 2022), coherent to acknowledged limitations by participants. This might represent poor time management or the complaint of STs that the system does not allocate enough time for English classes. Contingency plans, enhanced preparation and improved teaching methods were hinted, coherent with the previous answers received. 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.

3. 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) who found STs did not engage in effective reflective practices akin to Gudeta (2022), Hutaaruk (2024), Nurkamto and Sarosa (2020), and Riyanti (2020) whose participants demonstrated low reflective ability similar to that demonstrated in this study.

4. “How did you feel after reflecting on your teaching experience?”

Predominantly, the STs expressed a positive feeling coinciding with Barham (2023). Expressions such as “I feel great”, “I feel good” and “Amazing” predominated in 46% of cases in the first cohort; nevertheless, a surprising 38% left this item unanswered, indicating their ambivalence or their unwillingness to express their opinion. Finally, 15% wished they could redo the Practicum or recognized the impending need for improvement. The second cohort also displayed positive perceptions but offered more diverse reasons. Some reported mixed emotions, including initial discomfort when examining habits and beliefs; many acknowledged teaching's complexity; most appreciated the opportunity for pedagogical reflection and several expressed satisfaction in self-critiquing their teaching videos. This aligns with Van et al.'s (2022) assertion that reflective practice fosters awareness of limitations and promotes growth.

However, it contrasts with Aghabarari and Rahimi's (2020) finding that teachers rarely had positive perceptions post-reflection.

5. “Do you consider that through reflective practice you can become a better teacher?” The unanimous affirmative response follows the outcomes of Kramer (2018), Körkkö et al. (2016), Mansour Almusharraf (2020), Naseem et al. (2023), and Van et al., (2022). Notwithstanding, this could be a reaction deliberately intended to please the researcher because it somehow contradicts the lack of depth and critical analysis found in the content examination.

6. “Will you continue reflecting about your teaching in the future?” The mean for this item was 4,77 and 4,47 respectively, indicating a strong agreement to future reflection in all participants which is similar to findings from other studies (Altalhab et al. 2020, Alwaheebi, 2022, Kleimola & Leppisaari 2022), thus providing hope for more analytical pondering in the professional development of the pre-service teachers.

4.2 Content analysis

4.2.1 E-portfolio

As mentioned previously, a brief reflection was included on the e-portfolio answering the following questions: 1) Which aspects of today's lesson are you most proud of? 2) What challenges did you face during this lesson; and 3) What would you like to improve or do differently in your next lesson?

Content analysis indicates that student teachers (STs) generally do not engage in serious reflection. Disappointingly, some provided nearly identical responses throughout the fifteen-week period, suggesting a fabrication. This observation aligns with Houde's findings: “RP is faked by students who, as part of their classes often must engage in written reflection about their teaching practicum, producing what professors want to hear to get better grades” (Houde, 2022 p.1486). This is shared by Mann and Walsh (2017 cited by Ann et al., 2018) who cautioned that when reflection is done solely to complete a task, it loses its essence. In the case of the current investigation, very few instances evidenced certain development in the mindset of STs that could indicate some evolution which suggests inability to reflect (Ann et al., 2018; Padmanabha, 2023).

Identified themes for the first question included: students' engagement in the class; satisfaction with self -performance; and rapport with students. The spotlighted aspects were subjective; it is complicated for a teacher to determine if the students are engaged and really understanding just by observation. A novice teacher should go deeper in introspection and not just be satisfied with their own performance.

The challenges faced during the lessons equable to Hutaurok (2024) and Lee (2023) 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, all of which were mentioned in previous items regarding perceived challenges. Additionally, anxiety caused by communication issues while using L2 were mentioned frequently, aligned to Pasaribu et al.'s (2023) findings, indicating a need for language development and the necessity of consolidating confidence among English teachers.

Time management, including preparation and organization, occupied the first place among the aspects that STs signaled needed improvement (beyond practice), confirming once more the STs' self-perceived insecurity in their ability to manage and control the lessons' execution. Didactic concerns (more variety in teaching activities, techniques and material)

occupied a second place, similar to what Nababan and Amalia, (2021) reported. There is an evident tendency to focus on the actions occurring during class or its preparation, focusing on the practice dimension almost exclusively, aligned to Cadiz's (2021) findings. This confirms 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

As mentioned, only the second cohort complied with the video task, rendering the following results.

The dimension referring to practice was the primary factor in the STs' reflection coinciding with Ann et al. (2018) and Karlay et al. (2021). Specific concerns were related to planning and execution of mediation activities. Very few mentioned principles of teaching and even fewer discussed theory. Many explained the reasons why they had decided to become language teachers based on their love for language, their own experience as language students, and environmental influence.

Confirming quantitative data, STs conceded a need for improvement in time and classroom management. Only one of the participants expanded the reflection to social issues such as integration, inclusion and working on creating awareness of the need for empathy and collaboration, showing a wider spectrum of analysis.

4.3 Conclusions

The present study intended to examine the experience of STs on the implementation of reflective practice while complying with the mandatory teaching practicum.

Concurring with the evidence in literature 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 this area needs attention. Pre-service teachers did not demonstrate the skills nor the commitment to conduct sustained in-depth reflective practices while completing their mandatory practicum, akin to Asregid et al. (2023).

The responses documented within the e-portfolio as well as the reflective video exhibit a superficial, redundant character, evincing an orientation toward the fulfillment of a compulsory requirement rather than a genuine introspective process rooted in pre-service teachers' own beliefs, knowledge, and the impact thereof on their performance. Consequently, it is concluded that STs do not engage in reflective practices independently, and appear to be ill-prepared to do so, comparable to the study conducted by Ann et al., (2018).

As for the five reflective dimensions described by Farrell (2019), most STs engage on the practice but do not consider the philosophy, theory and principles of teaching. Beyond teaching is contemplated only in terms of incidents or dissatisfaction of occurrences during the lesson which can serve as red flags to detect improvement in the execution of the class. Deep analysis of the theory and principles of teaching were absent in the portfolios and videos.

Following the belief that reflective practice can be taught (Koh & Tan, 2016 cited in Khanjan et.al., 2018), the researcher concurs with other investigators (Al-Jaro & Asmawi, 2018; Asregid et al., 2023; Mansour Almusharraf, 2020; Rahimi, & Weisi, 2018; Tun et al., 2023) on the necessity to introduce in the teacher education programs the foundations of reflective practice

early on, creating a conscience of its relevance in professional development. It would be advisable to introduce the principles of reflective practice early on the academic preparation of future language teachers, providing the students with opportunities to start exploring this self-analysis.

STs on the second cohort, having been briefly instructed on reflective practice, were more involved and exuberant in 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. Rahimi and Weisi (2018) also recommended that reflective practice should be implemented regularly by in-training teachers given the favorable results obtained in their research relating reflective practice and self-efficacy. Some courses pertaining pedagogical content could require keeping journals, for instance, or in the case of teaching methods, students could be required to record themselves teaching a class and have classmates assess their performance.

It would be a worthwhile venture to pursue further research investigating the experiences of in-service teachers with reflective practice. Some of possible inquiries could include if and when the active teachers are reflecting upon the various dimensions involved in teaching a language. Such an inquiry could serve to evaluate the regularity with which these educators 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. Furthermore, it would prove interesting to investigate the means that they find more useful for reflection, and most importantly, if the outcomes of that reflection serve as input for professional development.

Notes

Conflict of interests: None

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