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The relationship between EFL teachers' reflective thinking and their teaching style in Iranian EFL context

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ABSTRACT

Reflective thinking and teaching style are considered as two prominent and influential factors in the process of education. There have been several studies carried out to investigate different aspects of each of these two factors. However, no studies have been done to explore the possible relationship between these two crucial elements. Therefore, the present study set out to fill the gap and explore the relationship between reflective thinking and teaching style among EFL teachers in Iran. Ninety EFL teachers including 50 males and 40 females were chosen as the participants of this research. The questionnaires selected for the data collection phase were given to the teachers and they were asked to fill them out. The collected data were analyzed and it was found that there was a positive correlation between EFL teachers' reflective thinking and their teaching style. The results of this research study can be of use for EFL teachers and teacher educators.

1. Introduction

According to Campbell (2008), teaching is an intricate activity which requires 'the interaction among subject matter, content, teacher characteristics, student characteristics, pedagogy, resources, and learning context' (p. 50). As Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) asserted, teachers play a crucial part in an educational system. Also, Brown (2007) stated that an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher can influence the quantity and the quality of learning. In fact, as Wright et al. (1997) put, enhancement in the efficacy of teachers can lead to improvement in the quality of the educational system. As Akbari (2008) stated, with the advent of post-method era, language teachers' role has witnessed substantial changes. Besides, according to Clandinin (1985), after post-method era, teacher educators have attempted to 'equip prospective and practicing teachers with different techniques that enable them to develop their personal practical knowledge' (p. 362). One of the techniques which has entered into the field of English language teaching (ELT) is the notion of reflection (Wright, 2010). Reflection, as Pacheco (2005) asserts, refers to 'critical thinking' about past experiences or current experiences that occur or are occurring in classroom settings' (p. 1). Campbell-Jones and Campbell-Jones (2002) argue that by reflection teachers

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flash back to their beliefs, experiences, and perceptions about teaching and learning so as to make reasonable decisions and enhance their teaching skills. Also, as Pacheco (2005) states, language teachers can use (critical) reflection to assess their teaching so as to make modifications in their teaching as well as their beliefs and attitudes.

In addition, in educational contexts, teachers are regarded as one of the main sources of education and, therefore, their teaching style is considered as one of the most influential factors in the process of education. According to Conti (1989), teaching style is 'the overall traits and qualities that teachers show in the classroom, which are consistent for various situations' (p. 15). Also, as Genc and Ogan-Bekiroglu (2004) asserted, based on the learners' needs and instructional goals, teachers employ various teaching styles. In other words, the interaction between the teacher, learners and educational setting affects the teachers' teaching styles. Moreover, according to Grasha (1996), teaching style refers to 'the teachers' attributes, pattern of beliefs, needs, and behaviours when they are teaching' (p. 42). In addition, according to Jarvis (2004), teaching style involves 'the implementation of philosophy; it contains evidence of beliefs about values related to and attitudes toward all the elements of the teaching-learning exchange' (p. 40). As Vaughn and Baker (2001) stated, employing different teaching styles can result in long-term learning on the part of students. They also argued that teachers can experience various teaching situations through employing different teaching styles. There are some factors that may influence teachers' choice of teaching styles; for example, teachers' ethnicity, teaching/learning context, objectives and design of courses, and research findings (Peacock, 2001), gender, seniority, and time of teaching (Abbott-Chapman et al., 2001), and learners' ideology, beliefs, and knowledge (Zahorik, 1990).

1.1. Statement of the problem

As Freeman and Richards (1996) stated, 'teachers are pivotal in the enterprise of teaching and learning' (p. 1). Also, in accordance with Griffiths (2007), 'teachers' practices and perceptions are critically important since they have the potential to influence the effectiveness of the teaching/learning process' (p. 91). On the other hand, as Brown (2007) asserts, although the effective role of English teachers has been demonstrated in EFL/ESL contexts, they have not received the attention they deserve. Besides, Akbari and Tavassoli (2014) argued that EFL teachers can be taken into consideration through conducting more studies on teachers-related characteristics and different problems they encounter in their work. One of the significant teacher-related factors is reflective thinking. As Richards and Nunan (1990) asserted, 'experience alone is insufficient for professional growth, but that experience coupled with reflection can be a powerful impetus for teacher development' (p. 8). The emphasis on investigating reflective thinking in the present research was motivated by the fact that, according to Burton (2009), reflective thinking has been shown to be an essential tool in teachers' professional development. Moreover, it has been found that reflective practice has a significant impact on teachers' knowledge and attitudes (Kabilan, 2007). Furthermore, the issue of how reflective thinking and teaching actually improve language teaching performance needs further investigations. Learners attend English classes with different expectations, aims, and learning styles. Thus, it is essential for EFL teachers to identify their learners' learning styles and attempt to tailor their

teaching styles to match their learners' learning style and goals. As Williamson and Watson (2007) assert, meeting the requirements of learners is of significance if teachers' aim to teach in a way that develops lifelong learning.

Several studies have been conducted to examine the different factors affecting teachers' teaching and performance, but it seems that EFL teachers' reflective thinking and their teaching styles deserve further scrutiny as they have been shown to affect teachers' performance and students' achievement. In Iran, English is taught and learnt as a foreign language and this makes it difficult to teach and learn. Most inexperienced Iranian EFL teachers are not aware of the complexity of teaching process and teach in the same way they were taught at schools and universities without much reflection on their teaching or making any effort to modify their method of teaching. It is therefore assumed that disclosing the quality of the association between reflective thinking and teaching style can be helpful in assessing whether and how teachers' various methods of teaching can be influenced by their reflective abilities.

After reviewing the different studies conducted on the variables of the study, i.e. teachers' reflective thinking and teaching style, their contributing impact on different variables was demonstrated. However, it was also realized that no study has ever addressed the relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' reflective thinking and teaching style in a single study. Thus, given the dearth of research in this area, the present study was carried out to tap into the relationship between these two influential variables and fill the gap in the literature. Based on the abovementioned issues, the following research question was formulated:

RQ: Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' reflective thinking and their teaching styles?

1.2. Significance and justification of the study

As Hanushek et al. (2005) asserted teachers affect their students' achievement profoundly. In addition, teachers alongside with parents are the main sources of good education; they transfer knowledge and information to students, and prepare them for further education. Thus, language teachers need to be aware of efficient pedagogical practices to create an environment which improves effective learning. Teachers' reflective thinking ability is one of the useful practices which has been proven to contribute to teachers' professional development, exert a considerable impact on students' achievement, promote students' thinking, and enhance their critical-thinking abilities. Also, according to Waltermire (1999), investigating teachers' reflective thinking ability can bring valuable insights into the education. Paying critical attention to teaching methods and thinking critically about practical values and theories, EFL teachers can be better prepared to adopt diverse methods of teaching which are attuned to the students' needs. Furthermore, as stated by Pollard (2002), applying reflective procedures can contribute teachers' professional growth, capability, as well as sense of accomplishment, which can ultimately bring about 'a steady increase in the quality of the education' (p. 5). As Akbari (2008) held, reflection 'empowers teachers and places them on equal footing with their academic counterparts' (p. 3). He believes that reflection can help teachers to increase their self-efficacy,

interpersonal relationship, and job satisfaction. It has also been found that teachers who are actively engaged in reflective actions are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward teaching (Kabilan, 2007), tend to employ innovative ideas in their classes (Messmann & Mulder, 2015), and receive better evaluations and feedback from their students (Winchester & Winchester, 2012). In accordance with Moradkhani et al. (2017) reflective teachers enjoy higher levels of self-efficacy. The current research study can be regarded as a novel one since it is the first attempt to address the possible bond between teachers' reflective thinking and their teaching style, especially among Iranian EFL teachers. Therefore, the findings of this study can enrich the knowledge in the area of EFL teaching and add to Iranian EFL teachers' knowledge with regard to their teaching style and reflective thinking abilities. Furthermore, this study can fill the gap in the literature regarding the lack of studies on the relationship between teachers' reflectivity and their teaching styles. The results of this study can also help EFL teachers raise self-awareness via getting involved in reflective practices and practically implementing them in the classroom.

2. Literature review

As Dewey (1933) held, reflection is 'active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends' (p. 9). Also, Dewey (1933) argued that reflective thinking creates a constant awareness in the context in which the ideas have been shaped. Furthermore, as Ferdowsi and Afghari (2015) stated, reflective teaching refers to 'a valuable teaching approach in which teachers collect information about their own classes and pay close attention to their behavior and teaching strategies critically' (p. 20). As Baleghizadeh and Javidanmehr (2014) put it, teachers employing reflection 'locate problems, question goals, explore contexts, analyse possibilities, and craft appropriate educational experiences to benefit learners' (p. 21). In addition, as Soodmand Afshar and Farahani (2015) asserted, reflective thinking plays a crucial part in language teaching, especially teaching English as a second/foreign language. They argued that reflective teaching resulted from reflective thinking is an essential quality of efficient teachers. Also, according to Ma and Ren (2011), reflective teaching can be considered as a process that plays an important part in the professional development of teachers. They argued that reflective teaching helps teachers to develop in their profession through by facilitating teaching, learning and understanding, helping teachers make more innovative decisions in their teaching practice and increasing their professional knowledge and ability.

Several studies have been conducted to investigate the notion reflectivity (reflective thinking) in the field of education and language teaching. In their study, Javadi and Khatib (2014) found that teachers' reflection was significantly related to teachers' feeling of burnout. Motallebzadeh et al. (2018) reported a positive correlation between total reflective practices and total teaching effectiveness. Shivat and Moshe (2019) explored the reflective thinking process over two years of pre-service teachers in their practical work they reported the participants in the 2nd year of practical teaching concentrated more on the aspect of personal processes and emotional aspects rather than technical aspects.Kurosh et al. (2020) investigated the role of self-efficacy and reflective teaching across different disciplines. They reported that just ELT teachers' perception of self-efficacy was related to their

reflectivity. Ayoobiyan and Rashidi (2021) found a positive relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' reflective practice and resilience. Kharlay et al. (2022) investigated the scope and quality of reflective practice among English language teachers in Ukraine. They reported that Ukrainian English language teachers use reflective practice consistently but not systematically in their teaching. They also found that the perception of experienced and novice teachers regarding reflective practice was significantly different.

Furthermore, according to Grasha (1996), teachers can affect their learners' learning and achievement via influencing their capability to acquire new knowledge. He also remarked that teachers can adjust their teaching activities to meet their learners' needs as they become more aware of their teaching styles. Also, teachers' teaching style has been proven as an effective factor in the teaching/learning process (Akbari et al., 2008; Grasha, 1996). In addition, teaching style is considered as one of the influential factors in the process of education. As Kazemi and Soleimani (2013) remarked, teaching styles is 'reflections of an amalgamation of teachers' theoretical assumptions and actual teaching practice' (p. 194). Grasha (1996) stated that teachers play different roles as an expert, formal authority, personal model, facilitator, and delegator. Also, Grasha (2002) asserted that teaching style is a continuum which includes different elements. He stated that teachers don't utilize a fixed style but they use different styles with varying degrees.

Many research studies have been carried out to explore teaching style in the realm of education. Rahimi and Asadollahi (2012) found a significant relationship between interventionist style (the prevalent teaching style of most Iranian EFL teachers) and the amount of teaching activities among the teachers. The results of the study conducted by Briesmaster and Briesmaster-Paredes (2015) indicated that certain teaching styles or style clusters seem to provoke more anxiety, especially when accompanied by other factors such as gender, grade point average and past performance. Heydarnejad et al. (2017) found significant correlations between teachers' teaching styles and their emotions. Sampermans et al. (2021) reported that teachers who support more engaged and all-around norms of citizenship, more frequently implement active teaching styles. The findings of Chan et al. (2021) revealed that the perceptions of teacher educators' teaching styles have significant associations with pre-service teachers' intrinsic motivation and academic engagement.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design

The design of the current research was descriptive-correlational. This type of design is used to describe the relationship or association between two or more variables. The goal of the present study was not to investigate a cause/effect relationship but rather it aimed at exploring the possible relationship between EFL teachers' reflective thinking and their teaching style.

3.2. Research question

Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' reflective thinking and their teaching styles?

3.3. Participants

The participants of this research included 90 EFL teachers (50 males and 40 females) who were teaching English across different levels at junior/senior high schools and English language institutes in Bukan, West Azerbaijan, Iran. They were also teaching English language for different proficiency levels. They held BA, MA, and Ph.D. in the fields of teaching, translation, and English Literature. Their teaching experience varied from 2 to 20 years and their age range was between 23 and 48. They were all native speakers of Kurdish. The teachers were selected non-randomly according to their accessibility (availability sampling) and willingness to take part in this study. The teachers taking part in the current study were fully aware of the objectives of this research and were assured that the data provided by them would be kept confidential. Table 1 includes the information of the participants of the current study.

3.4. Data collection instruments

The following sections are devoted to the discussion of the instruments used in the data collection phase of this research.

3.4.1. English Language Teaching Reflection Inventory (ELTRI)

English Language Teaching Reflection Inventory (ELTRI) developed by Akbari et al. (2010) was the first instrument employed in this study. It consists of 29 items and evaluates teachers' reflective thinking within five subscales of practical reflection (6 items), cognitive reflection (6 items), affective reflection (3 items), metacognitive reflection (7 items), and critical reflection (7 items). The participants were supposed to answer on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = never to 5 = always. Akbari et al. (2010) confirmed the acceptable internal consistency level of the scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.9).

3.4.2. Grasha's Teaching Style Inventory (TSI)

Grasha's (1996) Teaching Style Inventory (TSI) was used to identify the teachers' teaching styles. It is a 40-item self-reflective and self-reporting instrument on a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). It helps educators determine their own teaching style. It also enables teachers to determine whether their teaching activities and tasks contribute or hinder the learning process. The participants were expected to answer the items included in TSI on the basis of their own teaching style. Each 8 items identify one of the five basic teaching styles defined by Grasha regarding expert, formal authority, personal model, facilitator, and delegator teaching style. The reliability and validity of this instrument have been verified by Grasha's (1996) own study (alpha = 0.7).

Table 1. The information of participants.

Number of the participants	90 EFL teachers (50 males and 40 females)
Educational degree	B.A, M.A, and PhD.
Fields of study	English language teaching, English translation, and English Literature
Age	23–48 years old
Teaching experience	2–20 years
First language background	Kurdish

3.5. Data collection procedure

First, the participants were sampled through availability sampling. The subjects included 50 male and 40 female EFL teachers. Then, the first author sent an invitation letter to the participants via email and social media, i.e. Whatsapp and Telegram. In the letter, the researcher introduced herself and ensured that anonymity of the participants would be observed and that the confidentiality of their private information would be respected. Besides, she informed them about the purpose of the study. After taking their consent for participating in the study, the researcher sent the participants the two questionnaires through email and social networks taking convenience of the participants into account and kindly asked them to fill them and send the filled questionnaires to her. Finally, the filled questionnaires were collected and rated by the researchers. It should be noted that to ensure correctness of the scoring procedure, the help of a statistician was asked in scoring the questionnaires and analyzing the data. It is also worth mentioning that the questionnaires were scored according to their rating scale.

4. Data analysis

The following sections include the explanation of data analysis of the study.

4.1. Results of testing normality assumption

Table 2 shows the results of the normality test.

As seen in Table 2, the assumption of normality was not met for teaching styles data because the obtained *p* value (0.02) was less than the study p value (0.05). However, in the case of reflective thinking, the obtained p value (0.08) was more than the study p value (0.05), therefore, the assumption of normality was met for this variable. Accordingly, a non-parametric correlation test, that is, Spearman correlation test was used for measuring the correlation between reflective thinking and teaching style of EFL teachers.

4.2. Results of descriptive statistics

Table 3 shows the results of descriptive statistics for reflective thinking.

According to Table 3, the mean of the participants' reflective thinking was 49.66. Moreover, the standard deviation was 6.85.

As revealed by Table 4, 46 teachers (51.11%) had 'all-round flexible and adaptable teacher' teaching style. This was the most prevalent teaching style identified among the participants. The second most prevalent teaching style was 'student-centered, sensitive teacher' with the frequency of 25 and percentage of 27.77%. 'Official curriculum teacher' was adopted by 8 teachers who constituted 8.88% of the participants. Five teachers

Table 2. Normality test results.

	N	Statistic	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Teaching styles	90	0.02	0.2
Reflective thinking	90	0.08	0.07

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for reflective thinking.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Reflective thinking	90	32	69	49.66	6.85

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for teaching styles.

Group	Frequency	Percentage
All-round flexible and adaptable teacher	46	51.11
Student-centered, sensitive teacher	25	27.77
Official curriculum teacher	8	8.88
Straight facts no nonsense teacher	5	5.55
Big conference teacher	3	3.33
One-off teacher	3	3.33

(5.55%) had 'straight facts no nonsense teacher' teaching style. The least frequent teaching styles, whose frequency and percentage were 3 and 3.33, were 'big conference teacher' and 'one-off teacher'.

4.3. Results of correlation tests

To measure the relationship between the participants' reflective thinking and their teaching styles, Spearman correlation test was run. The results are presented in Table 5.

The results of Table 5 (r = .60, $p < .05$) indicated that there was a positive relationship between teachers' reflective thinking and their teaching styles. Thus, it can be said that some teaching styles are associated with higher reflective thinking. To measure the relationship between reflective thinking and sub-categories of teaching styles, another Spearman Product Moment correlation test was run. Its results are provided in Table 6.

As shown in Table 6, there was a significant relationship between reflective thinking and some sub-categories of teaching styles, i.e. all-round flexible and adaptable teacher, student-centered, sensitive teacher, and straight facts no nonsense teacher. This means that these three teaching styles are positively correlated with reflective thinking. The coefficients for the correlation between reflective thinking and all-round flexible and adaptable teacher, student-centered, sensitive teacher, and straight facts no nonsense teacher teaching styles were .64, .50, and .58, respectively. It is worth mentioning that the highest correlation was observed between all-round flexible and adaptable teacher teaching style (r = .64) and reflective thinking.

Table 5. Spearman correlation between reflective thinking and teaching styles.

		Teaching styles
	Spearman Correlation	0.6*
Reflective thinking	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.01
	N	90

Table 6. Spearman correlation between reflective thinking and sub-categories of teaching styles.

	All-round flexible and adaptable teacher	Student-centered, sensitive teacher	Official curriculum teacher	Straight facts no nonsense teacher	Big conference teacher	One-off teacher
Reflective thinking	0.64*	0.5*	0.28	0.58*	0.11	0.2

5. Discussion

Concerning the research question '*is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' reflective thinking and their teaching styles?*' The finding of the study showed that the interplay between reflective thinking and some sub-categories (i.e. all-round flexible and adaptable teacher, student-centered, sensitive teacher, and straight facts no nonsense teacher) of teaching styles was significantly positive. It was also found that the highest correlation was observed between all-round flexible and adaptable teacher teaching style and reflective thinking. The findings of the current research lent more support to the significant role of reflective thinking in language teaching and its positive relationship with teaching styles. The results of the present study are line with the findings of Rahimi and Asadollahi (2012) who found a positive association between teaching style and classroom management in English classes, Heydarnejad et al. (2017) who reported significant correlations between teachers' teaching styles and their emotions, Motallebzadeh et al. (2018) and Ayoobiyan and Rashidi (2021) who found a positive bond between reflective practices and teaching effectiveness, Sampermans et al. (2021) who examined the relationship between teachers' citizenship norms and their teaching styles and indicated the existence of a positive relationship.

The findings of this study indicated that reflective thinking and teaching style are positively related. Also, both teaching style and reflective thinking have been proven to be positively correlated with teaching effectiveness (Akbari et al., 2008; Grasha, 1996; Griffiths, 2007; Motallebzadeh et al., 2018). Therefore, the positive correlation between reflective thinking and some sub-categories of teaching style can be justified. It can be imputed to the point that teachers employ reflective thinking ability and different teaching styles to make their teaching as effective as possible. In addition, since both reflective thinking and teaching styles are tied to teacher effectiveness and professional development, it can be argued that professional development and teacher effectiveness might have mediated the relationship between teaching styles and reflective thinking. Also, because it has been proven that reflective thinking and teaching styles are shaped and re-shaped over time (Rahimi & Asadollahi, 2012), it is likely that teaching experience has played a mediating role in the association between teaching styles and reflective thinking. Moreover, based on the argument that different teaching styles contribute to different thinking styles (Rahimi & Asadollahi, 2012), and that reflective thinking and thinking styles are related, it can be claimed that thinking style may have affected the relationship between teaching styles and reflective thinking. Last but not least, considering the argument made by Akbari et al. (2005) that there is a significant relationship between personality type and teaching styles of Iranian EFL teachers, and the closed interplay between personality type and reflectivity, it is possible that the relationship between teaching styles and reflective thinking has been affected by personality type of teachers.

6. Conclusion

The findings of the study revealed that the interplay between reflective thinking and some sub-categories of teaching styles was significantly positive. Different factors can play a role in the process of language teaching among which different teacher characteristics including teacher reflective thinking and teaching styles can be mentioned. It can be understood that the interplay between the factors which influence language teaching is promising since enhancement of one factor can lead to enhancement of the other factor. Also, based on the results of the present research, it can be concluded that all-round flexible and adaptable teacher, student-centered, sensitive teacher, and straight facts no nonsense teacher teaching styles are associated with higher degrees of reflective thinking. Considering the importance of teacher reflectivity in teaching quality, teachers' attempts at practicing these three teaching styles can be of good help in improving the quality of their teaching. What adds to the importance of this point is that teaching and learning are closely interrelated and significantly influence each other. Moreover, since 'straight facts no nonsense teacher teaching style' was not so common among the participants of the present study, while it was significantly correlated with reflective thinking, it can be concluded that teachers should also use this teaching style in EFL teaching since it leads to higher reflective thinking among them.

In addition, the current study suffered from some limitations. The first limitation was related to the number of the participants which was rather low and may affect the generalizability of the results. Also, the sampling procedure can be regarded as another limitation of this research since the participants were selected on the basis of the accessibility and availability. Furthermore, the current research can be replicated through adding a mediating variable like self-efficacy to the topic. The present research can be conducted with teachers teaching at other fields of study.

7. Pedagogical implications

The findings of the current study may have some implications for teachers, especially EFL teachers, and teacher educators. One of the pedagogical implications of this study is that if language teachers want to increase their reflective thinking, they should try to select certain teaching styles. Another one is that EFL teachers should practice those teaching styles which are not common, but are correlated with reflective thinking (e.g. straight facts no nonsense teacher teaching style). Lastly, teacher education authorities should get involved in motivating teachers in order to use certain teaching styles (i.e. all-round flexible and adaptable teacher, student-centered, sensitive teacher, and straight facts no nonsense teacher) so that their reflective thinking can be improved. In addition, teacher educators can educate and prepare teachers to improve their reflective thinking ability so that they can reflect on their own performance and teaching practice and enhance their teaching performance.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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