Exploring Reflective Practices for In-service English Language Teachers' Professional Development

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Abstract

Reflective practice helps teachers to enhance their professional development by critically evaluating their actions, sharing experiences, and building confidence through collaborative discussions with peers. This study aims to explore reflective practices for in-service English language teachers' professional development. Narrative inquiry was employed as the research method, with semi-structured interviews to capture the participants' lived experiences. Four English language teachers, teaching at the secondary level in Rupandehi, were purposefully selected from two public schools as participants. The data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis, which allowed for the identification of key patterns and insights related to reflective practices. The findings revealed that all participants consistently engaged in reflective practices within their classroom teaching, regularly adapting and modifying their teaching strategies to enhance and update their professional skills. Reflective practice also fosters continuous professional growth by encouraging teachers to evaluate their actions, collaborate with peers, and promote a culture of sharing and pedagogical improvement. These findings suggest that reflective practice plays a crucial role in ongoing professional development, allowing educators to refine their teaching techniques. The study provides valuable insights for teachers, supporting them in becoming proficient reflective practitioners and contributing to more effective teaching methods.

Keywords: collaborative activities, professional development, reflective practice, self-inquiry, self-reflection

INTRODUCTION

Reflective practice is a systematic and collaborative approach to self-assessment and continuous improvement in teaching that fosters professional growth and enhances classroom outcomes. It encompasses a process of systematic

self-assessment and critical examination of teaching approaches aimed at achieving enhanced educational outcomes. Reflective practice is a systematic method where educators analyze their classroom experiences, identify strengths and areas for growth, and make informed changes to their strategies (Farrell, 2017). Collaborative reflective practices further enhance this process by fostering idea-sharing among educators and enriching the teaching community. When combined with professional development initiatives such as workshops, peer observations, action research, and training reflective practice offers a robust framework for academic and professional growth.

In the teaching profession, reflection serves as a critical method for reviewing past efforts and reframing practices that educators have previously engaged in. Reflective practice involves a systematic and cyclical inquiry process wherein teachers collect and analyze data about their teaching methods to foster self-improvement and enhance future practice (Farrell, 2016a; Mathew & Peechattu, 2017). This process positions teachers as perpetual learners who continuously gain insights from their experiences, literature, and ongoing professional development. As noted by Smith and Craft (2011), frequent engagement in reflective practices significantly enhances teachers' performance and facilitates professional growth. Through reflective practice, educators observe their activities and develop theories to address challenges faced in the classroom, thereby promoting their professional development (Agustin, 2019). Mann and Welsh (2017) assert that reflection plays a central role in professional improvement, directly impacting the effectiveness of teaching and learning activities. Mandal (2017) also highlights that many teachers in Nepal actively engage in reflective practice, recognizing its importance for their professional growth. Therefore, reflective practice is not merely an act of reflection; it represents a thorough examination of the teaching-learning process.

Reflective teaching is characterized by an ongoing process in which teachers consistently observe, assess, and adjust their instructional methods while critically evaluating their experiences. This practice encourages educators to engage in purposeful thought and research-based activities, particularly as they observe their students in action (Semerci & Kilinc, 2010). In a constantly changing educational landscape, teachers must remain flexible and adapt their lesson plans in response to new challenges. Although teachers may acquire effective strategies during their

training, the dynamic nature of teaching necessitates continual adaptation to ensure relevance.

The notion of 'one size fits all' is increasingly deemed inadequate in modern classrooms, emphasizing the importance of becoming a competent teacher for professional development. Reflective practices empower teachers to identify their strengths and weaknesses, thereby improving student outcomes. By sharing their professional development experiences with colleagues, teachers enhance their confidence and capacity for self-reflection. Gautam (2018) analyzed the transformational phases of his career as an English language teacher educator, illustrating how reflective experiences shaped his professional journey. As Bolton (2010) posits, reflective practice allows teachers to narrate their experiences meaningfully by engaging in dialogue with others and sharing their learning. Through this practice, educators can gain insights by exploring different perspectives, facilitated by collaborative learning activities, peer observations, and training opportunities.

Thus, reflective practices empower teachers to drive professional growth, inspire collaboration with leaders, and create learning communities to improve education and meet diverse student needs. However, Reflective practice is undervalued in Nepal due to administrative challenges, heavy workloads, and limited sharing cultures among teachers, despite its significance for professional development. Integrating structured and collaborative reflection into education programmes is essential for fostering teacher growth and enhancing teaching practices (Joshi et al., 2018). While reflective practice is essential for professional growth, research has not sufficiently addressed the structural and institutional barriers, such as heavy workloads and limited support, that hinder its consistent application, particularly in resource-constrained contexts like Nepal (Farrell, 2016a; Mathew & Peechattu, 2017; Mann & Welsh, 2017).

Ultimately, this study aims to explore in-service English language teachers' reflective practices to enhance their professional improvement, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of how reflection can positively impact teaching efficacy and professional growth. This study addresses the following research question: How do in-service English language teachers engage in reflective practice to foster their professional development?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section explores the role of reflective practice in teacher development, its significance as a lifelong learning process, and the challenges associated with its implementation in the context of teacher development.

Role of Reflective Practice in Teacher Development

Reflective practice is essential for in-service teachers to improve their teaching through self-evaluation, collaboration, and support from their schools. In-service teachers can enhance their pedagogical techniques through self-evaluation of their instructional practices. According to Gnawali (2008), self-reflection is more effective in facilitating educational improvement than merely learning from others. In collaborative teaching environments, educators work alongside their peers to ensure student comprehension (Komur & Gun, 2016). Reflective practice engages teachers in continuous learning and exploration of their pedagogical ideas, making it an integral component of in-service professional development (Gutierrez, 2015). This practice enables teachers to analyze and discuss each other's work, facilitating a deeper understanding of their strengths and weaknesses in preparation for constructive feedback. The importance of reflective practice has gained prominence, as teaching experience alone does not guarantee effective practices (Nguyen, 2017). Engaging in reflective activities encourages dialogue in the classroom and motivates instructors to develop context-specific lessons. However, public school teachers often face limited opportunities to assess their teaching techniques due to insufficient reflective practices. Candy (2020) noted that organizational constraints can hinder successful reflective practice.

Reflective practice has emerged as a fundamental approach in teacher development, offering educators a systematic method for improving their teaching through self-evaluation, peer collaboration, and institutional support. It is widely recognized as an effective strategy for enhancing instructional methods, fostering continuous professional growth, and promoting adaptive teaching practices (Gnawali, 2008; Gutierrez, 2015). Teachers engaged in reflective practices critically assess their teaching strategies, making necessary adjustments based on classroom experiences, feedback from colleagues, and evolving educational needs (Komur & Gun, 2016). This process is central to professional development,

particularly in in-service training, as it encourages teachers to become lifelong learners and adapt to the changing educational landscape (Ryan, 2015).

The professional development of in-service English language teachers is a critical area of investigation. Ongoing reflection activities allow teachers to enhance their professionalism in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities. Nevertheless, inadequate administrative support and overwhelming workloads in Nepal lead educators to perceive reflective practice as a less significant tool for professional development (Joshi et al., 2018). Effective implementation of reflective practice relies on support from the school administration. For teachers to identify effective and ineffective lesson components, they must make their teaching behaviours visible through collaborative reflective practice (Pokhrel, 2022). This approach fosters a culture of collaboration and strategic planning among colleagues, ultimately contributing to professional development within schools.

Reflective Practice as a Lifelong Learning

Learning is a lifelong process that requires teachers to continuously update their knowledge and adapt to new educational approaches. This process is no longer confined to specific courses taken during teacher preparation; instead, teachers must stay informed about the latest teaching methods and approaches. Given the rapidly evolving educational landscape, there is no longer a definitive framework from the past or external sources upon which teachers can rely to guide their future practices. Consequently, continuous education post-degree attainment is essential for teachers (Ryan, 2015). In this dynamic environment, educators must be adaptable, current, and responsive in their lesson planning.

Reflective practice helps teachers adapt to changing contexts by assessing their methods, gaining insights, and adopting innovative strategies for professional growth. While teachers may acquire certain strategies during their training, such knowledge can become obsolete as contexts change. The principle of 'one size fits all' remains relevant in contemporary classrooms, necessitating the adoption of innovative instructional methods. Reflective practice provides English language teachers with opportunities to assess their performance and enhance their professional growth. Reflection-on-action serves as a strategy for reviewing instructional decisions and generating new insights. Various platforms are essential for teachers to document their experiences, daily teaching strategies,

and other professional elements. Methods such as reflective journals, peer observation, lesson studies, action research, and digital tools like blogging are prevalent. Cirocki and Widodo (2019) emphasized two primary techniques used for reflective practice: microteaching and teaching practicum modules, thereby highlighting the significance of reflective practice for pre-service educators.

Reflective journals serve as valuable tools for teachers to record their work experiences, uncertainties, and inquiries, ultimately facilitating the generation of new ideas for instructional improvement. This self-engaging strategy allows teachers to learn from their teaching processes while identifying their strengths and areas for growth. For novice teachers currently in the classroom, maintaining reflective journals is crucial for their professional development, as these journals provide personal records of their teaching experiences. To cultivate a discourse that other reflective practitioners can utilize and share, teachers need to maintain these journals (Cirocki & Farrell, 2017). Through reflective journaling, teachers can clarify any uncertainties they encounter while instructing their students. Goker's (2016) research involving 16 pre-service Turkish teachers revealed that reflective journaling enhanced participants' comprehension of their teaching methodologies and assessment practices.

Collaborative reflection, supported by peer observation, lesson studies, action research, and technology, helps teachers improve their instructional methods and enhance student learning. Collaborative reflection on pedagogical practices can occur through peer observation, where teachers observe each other's instructional methods, provide constructive feedback, and share reflections. Such two-way discussions foster teachers' confidence, and commitment to teaching, and enhance their instructional approaches, helping students connect theory with practice. This collaborative environment also promotes collegiality, enriching teaching practices while heightening teachers' critical awareness of their own methods. Lesson study represents another approach teachers utilize to facilitate reflection. As a teacher-driven platform for collaborative inquiry, it supports curriculum development, instructional improvement, and student learning (Akiba et al., 2019). Through this process, teachers collaboratively identify challenges within teaching materials, enhancing student learning outcomes. Similarly, action research prompts educators to critically evaluate their instructional strategies, thereby encouraging their active participation in learning and enhancing their teaching practices. According to Myers (2014), technology plays a central role in improving the

quality of instruction globally in the twenty-first century. Various digital technologies are accessible to teachers, and by comparing their instructional practices with those of their peers, they are encouraged to engage in collective reflection (Tajeddin & Aghababazadeh, 2018). This reflection highlights the role of technology in facilitating English language instruction within schools.

Challenges of Reflective Practice in Teacher Development

Despite its benefits, the consistent implementation of reflective practice is often challenged by various organizational and cultural constraints. In many contexts, particularly in resource-constrained settings such as Nepal, teachers face significant barriers such as heavy workloads, inadequate administrative support, and limited time for collaboration and reflection (Candy, 2020; Joshi et al., 2018). These challenges hinder the full potential of reflective practice, limiting its impact on professional growth. The lack of a supportive infrastructure for reflection, including access to peer observation, collaborative reflection, and formalized time for self-assessment, exacerbates these limitations (Pokhrel, 2022).

Furthermore, the concept of reflective practice extends beyond initial teacher education and into the realm of lifelong learning. For teachers to remain effective, they must continuously evaluate and update their instructional methods, a task facilitated by reflective tools such as journals, peer observations, and action research (Cirocki & Widodo, 2019). These practices encourage teachers to assess their performance, engage with new pedagogical strategies, and gain insights into improving their teaching practices. However, the sustainability of reflective practice is often undermined by institutional challenges such as workload pressures and insufficient support (Cirocki & Farrell, 2017; Goker, 2016).

In reviewing the existing literature, studies highlight both the transformative potential of reflective practice and the barriers to its successful implementation. While research emphasizes the positive impact of reflective practice on teaching quality and professional development (Gnawali, 2008; Almazrawi, 2014). It also reveals that organizational constraints, lack of institutional support, and cultural factors hinder its widespread adoption (Mandal, 2017; Kramer, 2018). Many studies from diverse regions, including Nepal and Afghanistan, underscore the role of reflective practices in adapting to evolving educational demands. However, these studies often overlook the long-term sustainability of reflective practices and fail to address how structural barriers influence their consistent application

(Pokhrel, 2022; Gaire, 2023; Baluchzada, 2023). As such, further research is needed to explore how reflective practices can be effectively implemented and sustained across different educational contexts, particularly in settings like Nepal, where external factors may significantly influence their outcomes.

The studies reviewed highlight the importance of reflective teaching in enhancing teachers' professional skills and instructional methods. However, they fail to address the challenges of consistently implementing reflective practices across diverse contexts, particularly in resource-limited settings like Nepal. While various reflective tools are acknowledged for improving teaching, the gap in understanding their application in specific contexts, such as Nepal, calls for further research. A deeper investigation into how teachers in Nepal use reflective practices could provide valuable insights for improving teaching effectiveness and fostering sustainable professional development.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

In this study, a narrative inquiry research method was employed, making it qualitative as it aims to explore the actual lived experiences of the participants. According to Clandinin (2013), narrative inquiry guides the researcher in gathering information from the participants' past and present, providing a deep understanding of the events and experiences. This approach is particularly useful for exploring and comprehending the complexities of participants' realities, such as their excitement, feelings, emotions, and unfolding workplace experiences. Additionally, narrative inquiry allows for multiple interpretations of the data, as noted by Kim (2016). Wang (2015) also emphasized that live narratives enable the researcher to access multiple layers of information.

The study involved four purposively selected secondary-level in-service English teachers. This purposive sampling was chosen to ensure the involvement of participants with detailed knowledge of the specific issues under investigation, as recommended by Cohen et al. (2007). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences. Ethical considerations were upheld by obtaining informed consent from the participants, and they were fully briefed on the study's objectives. Permission to record the interviews on mobile devices was granted, ensuring transparency in data collection. To protect the participants'

identities, pseudonyms were used following Mertova and Webster's (2020) guidelines.

The participants exhibited a significant degree of engagement in reflective practices and were willing to share their insights and lived experiences related to these practices. The interviews were conducted in Nepali and later transcribed into English for analysis. The thematic approach by Barkhuizen et al. (2014) was utilized for data analysis, involving repeated data review, coding, categorizing findings, and identifying themes. Self-narratives offer important insights into individuals' self-perceptions and behaviours in their contexts. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, thematic analysis was employed, and descriptive themes were developed to systematically interpret the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data obtained from in-depth interviews regarding participants' experiences with reflective practice were analyzed and interpreted, resulting in the identification of two key themes: collaborative sharing of teaching experiences in reflective practice and technology-enhanced reflective practice. These themes provide a structured understanding of how participants engage with reflective practice in their professional environments. The first theme, collaborative sharing, emphasizes the importance of peer interaction and mutual exchange of teaching experiences as a means of fostering reflective growth. The second theme highlights the role of technology in enhancing reflective practices, demonstrating how digital tools support and expand the reflective process in contemporary educational settings.

Collaborative Sharing of Teaching Experiences in Reflective Practice

Through peer sharing, in-service teachers critically examine their professional development experiences, viewing interaction as a form of reflective practice. Such exchanges allow educators to benefit from the support and encouragement provided by their colleagues. Collaborative efforts, which involve sharing insights and actively listening to one another, enable teachers to clarify any uncertainties they may have. Hail et al. (2011) emphasize that peer sharing is a reciprocal process that fosters a deeper and clearer understanding among educators. Ramu asserted, "I emphasize making the classroom interactive by using pair work and group work." By making class interactive, teachers can learn a lot

of things from their students as the students are also resources of knowledge for teachers. By sharing their experiences, both teachers and students learn from each other. He further added,

> In the beginning, I was hesitant to share my teaching methods. However, after attending workshops and seminars, I changed my approach. Recognizing that teaching and learning are interactive processes, I began collaborating with colleagues. I invited them to observe my classes and also observed theirs. Although I was initially nervous, this exchange allowed me to openly discuss and address my teaching challenges.

Ramu shares his experiences reflecting on his professional practice during a peer-sharing activity. Initially, he feels uneasy about engaging in two-way conversations and lacks the confidence to invite his colleagues to observe his lessons. However, as he integrates this collaborative sharing practice into his professional routine, he finds inspiration to improve his teaching. This experience aligns closely with the findings of Foong et al. (2018), who assert that reflective practice is a collaborative learning process that offers numerous opportunities for correction and development. Ramu now engages in discussions with his colleagues about the challenges he faces in his instructional methods with increased confidence. Throughout their teaching careers, educators acquire knowledge not only from academic literature but also through their interactions and experiences with their colleagues. Gita stated, "My students are teaching me. I have learnt from my students. Sometimes they even have corrected my word meaning, my pronunciation, sometimes even grammar." Her narratives explore that she does not feel scared by students' corrections but rather as an opportunity to learn new things. Students can also serve as teachers, and learning never stops. Teachers may become aware of several facts about their instruction from the pupils and they love teaching and learning.

Reflective practice is enhanced through personal experiences and professional development opportunities like conferences. Reflective practice is a collaborative process through which teachers continually gain insights from their students, classroom experiences, educational resources, and other learning opportunities. Ramu has learnt about reflective practice more from his personal experiences and attending conferences like NELTA, than by other means. Raju stated, "When I started attending the conferences presenting and listening to

others' presentations, I started to reflect more. I also started to share my reflections in the classroom. Earlier, I never shared my reflections." His experience indicates that the students become closer to him. His professional learning is that sharing reflection brings students closer to teachers. His view is consistent with Gnawali (2016) who mentions that conferences and other events make a platform for teachers to professional networks and learn.

Teachers with colleagues exchanging ideas and expertise add more confidence in teachers. Professional development becomes rewarding for teachers if they work together to see their situation through others' eyes. Sanju mentioned, "Studying in groups and sharing helped me to know the things that I could not know about being alone. I implemented this strategy on my students. My students liked working in groups in a cooperative venture." Sanju gives importance to collective practices as she shares her ideas with her colleagues as a cooperative venture. It makes all her fellow teachers feel easy to work with. Her learning ideas are in harmony with Vygotsky's ideas of the Zone of proximal development. Less talented teachers or learners can learn from more talented ones in the course of sharing ideas. Teachers have to significantly contribute to creating a shared learning atmosphere (Humaira & Rarieya, 2008). Peer sharing does not imply inequality between the teachers involved (Robbins, 2015). Hence, teachers feel free to change their views on academic discussion with each other. Gita stated, "I don't use a particular method or plan when I teach. I use an eclectic approach, which implies that, depending on the situation and the environment, I apply some strategies and methodologies. I, therefore, integrate strategies from several perspectives." Her lived experience demonstrates that reflective practitioners are innovative thinkers who dislike sticking to just one way and prefer to bring about change in everything, including the methods they employ.

Problems she faces in the classroom are like an opportunity for her to dig into them and work on them. In this regard, Raju asserted, "While teaching in the classroom, whenever I face some problems, immediately I develop a research topic on that particular problem and I just browse some of the articles on the net for literature." His life story indicates that while conducting action research, he reads a lot of literature which acts as motivation for him and enhances his professional skills.

Technology-Enhanced Reflective Practice

The integration of technology is crucial for enabling teachers to reflect on and enhance their teaching performance. Teachers reported that they engage in reflective practices by incorporating technology into their instructional methods. Gita asserted, "Although I was a trained teacher, I had never received ICT training. I was literate in computer technology but didn't know how to use it in teaching. I even didn't have my computer." Her lived story shows that teachers are mostly on their own in terms of learning and practising new things. She added, "I use ICT to develop the students' knowledge. These days, I use PowerPoint to aid lessons. I also present through PowerPoint." With the use of ICT, she develops students' knowledge to grow in their learning. As a teacher educator, by using ICT devices myself and encouraging the students to use them, I make teaching more effective. Ramu mentioned, "ICT training organized by my school after COVID-19, 2019, I learnt to record my classroom teaching activities to get me back. My audio recorder provided me insight with into a platform for digital collaboration. Then I got improvement in teaching." Ramu's response indicates that the incorporation of technology significantly enhances the teaching and learning process. Through digital collaboration and the review of his recorded classes, he can identify and address his challenges. Utilizing technology to record his instructional sessions facilitates his reflective practice, allowing him to critically examine his teaching methods.

Video recording serves as an effective technique for self-reflection, enabling educators to gain insights into their instructional practices. Recording video is a technique for reflective practice to mirror oneself. In this regard, Sanju claimed, "I gave my recording even to colleagues in school. That helped me to improve my teaching. Recordings develop the habit of the ability to practice with reflection." Her narratives reveal that incorporating technology in education is a good reflection of teachers' work. Teachers may cooperate with a different software application to teach the students and they get corrected through it. She reveals that the teachers and students get many benefits. The teachers look at them by their performances and they are inspired to do well. Recordings develop the habit of the ability to practice with reflection. It ensures the quality of educators. Self-reflection via video recording contributes to the professional's overall development (Kayapinar, 2016). Raju asserted,

Technology was new to me, but after the epidemic in 2020, I used it. I began instructing students in the classroom using a computer. In addition to that, when we were in lockdown, I made an electronic portfolio. I looked at my e-portfolio to learn more about myself.

Raju's experiences illustrate that engaging with technology provides a valuable means for teachers to observe and evaluate their professional practices. Despite being new to technology, he demonstrates a willingness to adapt and utilize it as a tool for self-reflection. The use of an e-portfolio serves as a technological platform that connects him to previous documentation of his knowledge and offers opportunities for ongoing updates to his work. This approach facilitates his reflective process, enabling him to critically assess his teaching practices and enhance his professional development.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study talks about the reflective practices of in-service English language teachers in enhancing their professionalism. The study reveals that reflective practice encourages teachers to critically evaluate their classroom activities, allowing them to reshape their beliefs and thinking in ways that promote continuous learning and professional growth. Through reflection, teachers become increasingly aware of the need to present themselves as competent professionals. Collaborative efforts to improve teaching, such as working in groups, enable teachers to gain deeper insights into their pedagogical methods. Teachers also enhance their teaching by engaging in professional development opportunities, such as conferences, seminars, workshops, training, action research, and peer observation. This fosters a culture of sharing within schools, providing an optimal environment for professional development. Such shared practices facilitate pedagogical shifts, allowing teachers to continuously evolve in their roles. The habit of reflecting on work experiences cultivates a professional culture of sharing, which serves as a valuable avenue for academic advancement. Teachers' regular review of their professional experiences ties their current practices to prior efforts, and through comparison and reflection, they make necessary adjustments to improve their teaching methods. Furthermore, the integration of technology such as PowerPoint presentations, e-portfolios, and Zoom enhances teachers' reflective practices, enabling them to assess their previous experiences and receive collective feedback for professional growth. Effective utilization of technological

resources in education improves learning outcomes. A culture of sharing among teachers promotes professionalism, develops their identity in teaching and enhances student achievements. Through self-reflection, teachers devise effective strategies to adapt to the evolving demands of their profession to be professionally sound teachers.

Teachers who engage in peer teaching, action research, and peer observation co-create academic discourse, enriching their reflective practices. This study offers valuable insights for other reflective researchers and practitioners, presenting pertinent information in an accessible format to advance English language teaching and learning. Additionally, it provides valuable insights into reflective practices for policymakers in the development of policies aimed at supporting reflective practice. However, as a small-scale study, its conclusions may not be generalizable to all teachers across the nation. Therefore, future research should address barriers such as institutional support, teacher workload, and access to professional development to offer a more comprehensive understanding. Reflective practices can be widely adopted and sustained in diverse educational contexts by fostering a culture of continuous professional development, encouraging collaboration among educators, integrating reflection into institutional policies, and providing accessible resources and training.

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