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## EFL Teachers' Reflective Journal Writing: Barriers and Boosters

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### ABSTRACT

The study examined the extent to which Iranian EFL teachers were familiar with reflective journal writing (RJW), the possible contribution of a consciousness-raising interactive workshop to the participants' individual and collective journal writing, and their perception of the barriers to RJW. The study enjoyed a qualitative design employing interviews and journal writings for data collection. Thirty Iranian EFL teachers sat a face-to-face interview. They were also asked to write two reflective journals, (one individually and one collectively), before, and two others after attending a consciousness-raising interactive workshop on reflection which adopted Richards' (1995) framework on teacher reflection and Soodmand Afshar's (in press) journal content guide. The grounded-theory-based content analysis was employed to analyze the data collected. The results indicated an improvement in participants' familiarity with RJW after the event. Furthermore, the barriers to RJW were identified as 'institutional issues', 'teacher issues' and 'educational system issues'.

**Keywords:** reflective journal writing; consciousness-raising interactive workshop; Iranian EFL teachers; individual and collective reflective journal writing; barriers

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## Introduction

Teachers formerly focused mainly on the 'methods' of foreign language teaching which urged them to have a basically top-down relationship with learners (Akbari, 2007). The 'post-method' paradigm revolutionized this top-down relation, held teachers accountable for their actions and encouraged them to reflect over what they had been doing in their classes (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). Subsequently, in light of such paradigm shifts, reflective teacher education came into existence wherein teachers were no longer considered as passive followers of others' theories, but as reflective practitioners theorizing their practices and practicing their theories (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Griffiths, 2000).

Accordingly, reflection has become inextricably intertwined with every classroom practice as teachers actively engage in doing reflection while they are teaching (reflection-*in*-action), on the things that they have taught and done in their classes (reflection-*on*-action) and for the things they are going to teach (reflection-*for*-action) (Schön, 1983). Hence, imagining an educational context in which teachers act without reflection is now impossible (Akbari, 2007). Moreover, considering the need for the persistent and continued progress in teaching, teachers should pursue their improvement through both individual and collective reflective practice (Moradkhani & Shirazizadeh, 2017).

Reflection is thus one of the tools through which teachers would be able to think over, challenge and reconstruct their faulty instructional activities and classroom behavior. One of the major means through which teacher reflection can take place is RJW as employed in the current study. Journals as "speech written down ... allow writers to observe, question, speculate, digress and show self-awareness" (Casanave, 2011, p. 4). RJW is of crucial importance in teaching, learning and research due to its three various roles mentioned by Casanave (2011) which include personal, cognitive and social functions that encompass expressing feelings openly, becoming aware of self and building up relationship with others respectively.

## Literature Review

As mentioned earlier, the paradigm shifts towards criticality and constructivism in education have prompted teachers to act reflectively and participate actively in order to grow professionally. As Wade and Yarbrough (1996) maintain, the root of the term '*reflection*' comes from to the Latin word of 'reflectere' which literally means 'to bend back'. In educational contexts, reflection refers to teachers' ability to observe and assess their own teaching experiences, to view their experiences with an analytic lens and to become more conscious of their feelings and thoughts (Körkkö, Kyrö-Ämmälä, & Turunen, 2016). In this sense, reflection, as a set of beliefs and practices should naturally enhance teaching quality and should not be regarded as an ornament to be used for aesthetic purposes (Farrell, 2015). Instead, teachers should use their experiences, recognize a problematic situation and try to come up with practical solutions to address problems with the help of reflection (Tauer & Tate, 1998).

Dewey (1933), as the pioneer of research on reflection as related to education, sees reflection as "the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it" (p. 9). Following Dewey and Schön, Clarà (2015) describes reflection as "the thinking process that gives coherence to an initially incoherent and unclear situation, where the situation is understood to be a convergence of events with an agency (vectors), holistically experienced by the subject" (p. 3). Apart from the variety of definitions put forward for reflection, upon which there is no unanimous agreement, inviting reflection to the classroom also seems to be difficult for teachers whose professional knowledge and practices are

limited. As a result, systematic guidance and support from educators are required (Yuan & Mak, 2018).

As mentioned earlier, journal writing seems to be one of the major means of reflection. Some scholars in the field including Casanave (2013), Fulwiler and Gardner (1999), and Staton and Peyton (1988) have investigated the role of journal writing in L2 education. Casanave, (2013), for instance, highlighting the importance of journal writing in L2 education, maintains that:

*Journal writing in L2 field is risk-free, personal, reflective, and responsive writing activity done regularly over time in a style that suits the writer's personality and proficiency level. Journal writing is unconstrained, in most cases, by academic conventions and generally uncorrected for language errors that do not impede comprehensibility. This definition applies not only to ESL/EFL/SL, but to teachers and researchers who are studying language learning and teaching and who are continuing their professional development. (p. 5)*

Given the above definition, potential benefits of journal writing as related to teachers are worth mentioning. Silverman (2005), for instance, believes that keeping journals benefits the teachers because journals help them trace their development over time, reflect over their actions, manage their time, and guide their future plans. Additionally, journals help teachers to provide a cohesive general picture of themselves as a member of the teaching community (Power, 2017).

Journal writing, in general, seeks some principal purposes in Stevens, Emil and Yamashita's (2010) views including serving journal keepers as a treasure for the future use, making teachers write and record their observations, describing the exact events happening in their classes and voicing their ideas developed during the reflective process. Accordingly, keeping journals by teachers is encouraged because it makes teachers engage in the process of reflection over their teaching during the writing process (Otienoh, 2009) although it requires time and motivation on the part of teachers (Davis, 2003).

Thus, to sum up this part, it could be argued that the act of reflection can happen through various ways such as acting, writing, speaking, listening, etc., among which writing (i.e. RJW) seems to be more structured (Moon, 1999). In terms of teacher development, RJW requires teachers to question their teaching and learning suppositions and build a strong knowledge base (Lee, 2008). To achieve the goals mentioned, educational contexts have to develop reflective culture and teachers need to be stimulated to attend both individual and shared (i.e. collective) reflective activities. Developing such a reflective culture would be possible only in an open context (Valli, 1997) in which there is flexibility in reflecting upon various issues.

A considerable number of studies have been conducted with regard to reflective practice in second/foreign language education. For one, Moradkhani and Shirazizadeh (2017) conducted a study to investigate the context-related variables that might help/obstruct the reflection procedure. To this end, they employed a mixed-method design for their study. First, 85 EFL teachers (41 teaching in public schools and 44 working in private language institutes) filled out Akbari, Behzadpour, and Davdand's (2010) reflective teaching inventory. Ten out of 85 participants also sat a follow-up interview. The results of the study indicated that private language institute teachers were engaged in lower levels of reflectivity (i.e. practical, cognitive, and affective reflection). On the other hand, no difference was reported between the two groups regarding the higher levels of reflection (i.e. metacognitive and critical reflection). Also, the findings revealed that some context-related variables influencing reflectivity included knowledge of reflection, institutional demands, teachers' attitudes towards teaching, availability of resources, and collegial support.

In another study, Abednia, Hovassapian, Teimournezhad, and Ghanbari (2013) examined six in-service teachers' views towards advantages and challenges of journal writing in a course at BA level. The results were analyzed through thematic analysis. Self-awareness, understanding of issues related to ELT, reasoning skills, and dialog with the teacher educator were found to be among the contributions of the study. Moreover, two challenges were mentioned for writing journals including lack of an in-depth reading of course materials and lack of full participation in discussions and the tension between their schooling background and the reflective nature of journal writing.

Teachers' perceptions of reflective teaching overall have also received attention in the literature. Soodmand Afshar and Farahani (2018), for instance, explored 304 Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of reflective teaching, the inhibitors to their reflective teaching and the impact of teaching experience and academic degree on their reflective teaching. The findings showed that the teacher participants of the study perceived their reflective teaching to lie at a medium level. Also, the inhibitors to EFL teachers' reflective teaching were reported to include 'lack of knowledge', 'affective-emotional' and 'teaching situation' factors.

Furthermore, Zulfikar and Mujiburrahman (2018) investigated the perceptions of 20 teachers, selected through snowball and convenience sampling techniques, of the influence of reflective journals on their teaching attitudes. The participants were asked to write reflective journals on their teaching strengths and weaknesses. The participants also sat two rounds of interview lasting 30-45 and 10-15 minutes respectively. The first round was conducted to find out the participants' perceptions of journal writing, journal content, and the perceived positive impact of journals on teaching attitudes. The second round was conducted to confirm the participants' responses to the first round interview. The data were analyzed through the three-stage grounded-theory-approach coding and content analysis. The findings showed that reflective journal enhanced teachers' self-improvement. In addition, most of the participants thought that reflective journals were of significant importance as they improved their teaching and also promoted teaching consciousness.

In another study concerned with practical aspects of reflectivity, Turhan and Kirkgoz (2018) investigated critical reflection of 49 Turkish EFL teachers aged between 20 and 22. The journals written were analyzed through inductive content analysis using the Reflection Scale by Bain, Packer and Mills (1999). The participants observed two lessons during four weeks and filled structured observation forms ranging from 'Excellent' to 'Poor'. In addition, they commented on observations and wrote their points of views about the usefulness of reflective writing. The findings showed that participants' reflections were mostly at the first level of Bain et al.'s (1999) scale called 'reporting' level. In other words, the participants only sufficed to writing the reports of what they could observe. However, later on they were able to reach the 'moderate' level of the reflection scale. Additionally, the participants mentioned some benefits for following reflectivity including experiencing a real classroom environment, gaining new insights, realizing the gap between theory and practice, detecting good and bad aspects of teaching, and gaining an insight about positive and negative aspects of being a teacher.

#### *Significance of the study*

Education in general and teacher education in particular, are not neutral as they are inextricably intertwined with the broader social life (Pennycook, 2001) which consists of multifarious issues such as poverty, discrimination, teachers' and students' feelings, thinking, etc. Therefore, teachers' emotions and thoughts before, during and after their instruction should be taken into consideration (Beauchamp, 2014). Apparently, the solution to this issue is reflective teaching simply because in reflective teaching programs, the topics covered range from the most detailed

topics like classroom teaching behaviors to the most general ones like social aims of education (Fauer & Tate, 1998) which link the small classroom context to the broader level of society.

Thereupon, reflective teaching provides techniques whereby teachers would be more conscious of their thoughts and feelings inside and outside their classes (Akbari, 2007). Apart from helping teachers to go beyond the level at which they are (Farrell, 2013b), reflective teaching makes them develop a fresh sense of informed practice (Crandall, 2000). Likewise, Farrell (2004) maintains that reflective teaching improves critical thinking since it makes the teachers think about many aspects of an issue and refresh themselves by using a discovery approach. Given this, it seems that, on the one hand, teacher educators have not been highly successful in providing a clear picture of reflection in general, and in putting it into practice in actual classroom settings in particular (Beauchamp, 2014). On the other hand, various reflective approaches and instruments have been adopted in the educational contexts including action research, class observation, critical approaches, etc. the degree of success of every one of which might vary.

Among these approaches, RJW is the most frequently utilized procedure (Farrell, 2004) to the effective role of which in teacher education, many scholars in the field have referred (e.g., Bolton, 2001, Farrell, 2013b). In the same vein, Daloglu (2001) believes that teachers who write reflective journals make attempts to connect their prior knowledge to the new knowledge and get to know their weaknesses and strengths better. Another benefit mentioned for RJW is the problem identification nature of reflective journals. In other words, by writing reflective journals, teachers would be able to both think upon their problems and find their solutions (Schön, 1983). Therefore, due to this crucial role of RJW in L2 teacher education and the paucity of research on the impact of RJW on foreign language teachers' performance in Iran, the current study was designed and conducted.

#### *Research questions*

The present study was thus set out to address the following research questions:

1. Are Iranian EFL teachers familiar with RJW?
2. Are Iranian EFL teachers already trained on RJW?
3. In Iranian EFL teachers' view, what are the barriers to RJW?
4. How can consciousness-raising interactive workshop on reflection contribute to the content quality of individual and collective journals written by Iranian EFL teachers?
5. In what ways do such consciousness-raising activities on reflective journal writing as interactive workshops contribute to Iranian EFL teachers' teaching quality overall?

#### **Methodology**

##### *Participants*

A total number of 30 EFL teachers (22 female and 8 male) working in private language institutes in the city of Sanandaj, were selected (based on convenience sampling) as the participants of the current study. Sixty individually-based reflective journals and two collective reflective journals were collected from these teachers overall. The participants held a B.A. (N=21) or an M.A. (N=9) in TEFL and had the experience of teaching English as a foreign language for three to nine years.

The teachers all worked part-time in private language institutes. The participants also attended one-to-one semi-structured interviews and focus-group interviews as well as a consciousness-raising interactive workshop on reflection.

## *Data collection instruments*

### ***Journal writing***

As mentioned earlier, research journals were used in the current study, the framework of which was adopted from Richards (1995) and the content of which was based on Soodmand Afshar (in press). Richards' (1995) stages, including *the event itself*, *recollection of the event* and *review and response to the event*, are somehow similar to Schön's (1983) reflection *on-*, and *in-*action. At the first stage of Richards' (1995) framework, the teaching episodes occur wherein there might also be some self-reflection. At the following stage (i.e. recollection of the event), there is an evaluation of what has happened whereas at the third stage, the participants return to the event and review it more profoundly by asking some questions. Moreover, to fulfill the purpose of the study, the participants were asked to write reflective journals individually besides writing journals collectively which was put into practice in the form of focus-group interviews.

### ***Focus-group interviews***

Focus-group interview is an interview with a small group in which the interviewer acts as a facilitator rather than a sole one-to-one interviewer (Dörnyei, 2007). The participants were asked to attend a focus-group interview in addition to writing journals. The focus-group interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and documented which were then regarded as collective reflective journals.

### ***Individual semi-structured interviews***

First, the semi-structured interviews were subjected to expert view. That is, two experts holding Ph.D.s in Applied Linguistics read and commented on the interview questions, based on whose ideas, necessary adjustments were made. Then, the interviews thus constructed were conducted with the participants. The first semi-structured interview was conducted before running the workshop (see Appendix 1) and the second semi-structured interview was conducted after running the workshop (see Appendix 2).

## *Procedure*

The current study enjoyed a qualitative design consisting of journal writing, individual semi-structured interviews, and focus-group interviews. First, 30 Iranian EFL teachers attended a semi-structured interview in order for us to know whether they were familiar with RJW and whether they had already been trained in this regard. Then, they were asked to write one reflective journal individually and one collectively without adopting any preplanned framework or attending any consciousness-raising activity on reflection. For the collective journal writing, the participants sat a focus-group interview together as mentioned earlier. Subsequently, one of the researchers carried out a four-hour interactive workshop on RJW.

The purpose of the workshop was to familiarize the participants with RJW based on the framework proposed by Richards (1995) mentioned earlier. Also, the workshop focused on the content or what should be included in a reflective journal. This journal content guide was adopted from Soodmand Afshar (in press) which incorporates such principal aspects as classroom issues,

instructional approaches and activities, teaching materials, class management, and lesson planning issues, sociopolitical and affective factors in teaching, etc. Afterwards, the participants were asked to write two other reflective journals, one individually and one collectively through a focus-group interview based on what they had gained in the workshop.

Furthermore, all the participants attended a one-to-one semi-structured interviews aiming at investigating the way the reflection consciousness-raising workshop presentation contributed to the enrichment of the content of their reflective journals and to their teaching quality overall. The semi-structured interview also aimed at finding out the possible barriers to RJW from the participants' points of view.

### **Data analysis**

The required data for the first and second research questions were collected through the first semi-structured interview and analyzed through descriptive statistics including frequency analysis. The data collected for the third, fourth and fifth research questions were analyzed through grounded-theory approach inductive content analysis moving from open coding, to axial coding, and finally to selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1988, as cited in Dörnyei, 2007). That is, first, we read the participants' interview transcripts and reflective journals several times and identified the recurring patterns and the common sub-themes. Next, in axial coding, the sub-themes or sub-categories were combined. That is, the similar concepts and sub-themes were linked together to form broader and more inclusive codes or categories. Finally, in selective coding, some 'core categories' or 'central points' subsuming other categories were selected to summarize the data. Furthermore, these selected core categories were finally "quantitized" (Dörnyei, 2007) and subjected to frequency analysis. Some examples from the data might help shed light on the issue. For instance, in addressing the fifth research question of the study investigating how the interactive workshop contributed to Iranian EFL teachers' teaching quality overall, two codes were finally reached in the selective coding stage: "professional development" and "identity construction/enhancement". These two codes were reached based on the grounded-theory approach inductive content analysis. Here are the steps taken for extracting and selecting the above-mentioned codes to elucidate the issue. Thus, some excerpts of the interviewees need to be presented:

Mona's interview:

This workshop and the following RJW that *we all had mainly helped me*

*to improve in my profession* as I focused both on my pluses and minuses of my

teaching. It occupied my mind the whole time from one class to another. The workshop

gave me insight about the next classes minimizing my weaknesses. I also saw myself as a teacher... *It was a strong feeling growing gradually inside...*

Sonbol's interview:

um...to be honest, I am thinking about how great the workshop and

journal were ... and I am thinking about such great workshops for the next terms. I think *I was a solid teacher before the event and now I am a great one. I felt a step-by-step growth in myself in another role I [now] have in my life ...*

Shabnam's interview:

I think the workshop and the journals *I wrote led to a quality improvement* in our teaching because it made us transcribe our messy thoughts to an organized journal. I think this organized journal helped me to focus on all points of my class and remove my weak points eventually....

Somaye's interview: "In the workshop and journal writing, *I talked about some of my frequent bad points with my colleagues and asked them for recommendation... "*

Rozhin's interview:

Before participating in this workshop and writing journals, I was shy of being observed by my colleagues and supervisors and even talking to them about my problems. But, now I'm ok with that as I reflected upon my problems and I got to know that *getting help from my colleagues* seems to be a great remedy for all of my pains in me as a teacher....

In the open coding stage, the sub-themes or sub-categories were identified and highlighted which are italicized in the excerpts above. In these five excerpts, some of the recurring patterns or the sub-categories leading to the eventual selected code of "professional development" included, *this workshop ... helped me to improve in my profession; It led to a quality improvement in our teaching; talked with my colleagues about the bad points; and I felt a step-by-step growth in myself ...*. As it is evident, all these recurring themes or sub-categories can be combined and summarized under the broader code of "It helped me develop professionally" through the "axial coding" stage. The same trend applies to the axial code, "It helped me construct my identity" which comprises such sub-categories as, *I was a solid teacher before the event and now I am a great one; I saw myself as a teacher; It was a strong feeling growing gradually inside; and ... in another role I[now] have in my life*, which was finally summarized to "identity construction/enhancement" through the last selective-coding stage. That is, in the selective coding, we selected some central ideas or core codes/categories to label the previous-level codes more neatly which finally yielded "professional development" and "identity construction/enhancement" as is evident in Table 5.

## Results

The results of the first research question investigating Iranian EFL teachers' familiarity with RJW (see the first question of the semi-structured interview in Appendix 1) are presented in Table 1.



Table 1  
The Participants' Responses on their Familiarity with RJW

Response	Yes		No	
	F	P	F	P
Teachers' familiarity with journal writing	13	43.3	17	56.6

Note: F= Frequency; P= Percentage.

As shown in Table 1, only less than half of the participants (43.3%) had some kind of previous familiarity with RJW.

The second research question investigated Iranian EFL teachers' previous training experience in RJW (see the second question of the semi-structured interview in Appendix 1). The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2  
The Participants' Responses on their Previous Training Experience in RJW

Response	Yes		No	
	F	P	F	P
Teachers' previous training experience in RJW	0	0	30	100

Note: F= Frequency; P= Percentage.

As shown in Table 2, all of the participants reported that they had never been trained during their professional life in terms of RJW.

The third research question of the study explored the inhibitors or barriers to RJW from EFL teachers' points of view (see the first interview question in Appendix 2). The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3  
The Participants' Responses on the Barreirs to RJW

Response	F	P
Lack of training	30	100
Rigid rules of language institutes	28	93.3
Teachers' low salary	20	66.6
Teachers' lack of time	19	63.3
Unfamiliarity and lack of knowledge	17	56.6
Lack of motivation	12	40
Conflict bwtween teachers' old educational habits and the new systems	12	40

Note: F= Frequency; P= Percentage.

As indicated in Table 3, the inhibitors to reflective journal writing from the participants' views can be classified into the three categories of 'institutional issues', 'teacher issues' and 'educational system issues'. In terms of institutional issues, all the participants regarded '*lack of training*' for RJW as the main barrier to reflective teaching. Also, 93.3% thought that the *rigid rules of language institutes*

was another barrier in this respect. With regard to teacher issues, *teachers' low salary, teachers' lack of time, teachers' unfamiliarity with and lack of knowledge of reflection, and their lack of motivation* were among the most impeding barriers. Educational system issues included such factors as *the conflict between teachers' old educational habits and the new systems* which was thought to be among the main barriers related to this sub-category.

The fourth research question investigated the possible contribution of reflection consciousness-raising interactive workshop presentation to the quality of Iranian EFL teachers' RJW. To this end, the content of the first-round reflective journals, both the individual and the collective ones, was compared to that of the second-round journals in terms of content complexity. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4  
*Comparison of the Content Complexity of the Individual and Collective Journals Written Before and After Attending the Reflection Consciousness-raising Interactive Workshop (First- and Second-round Journals respectively)*

Content of the first-round journals	P	Content of the second-round journals	P
The number of students	96.77	-----	
The process of teaching	100	Teaching methods, strategies and their suitability	100
The materials taught	93.54	The materials taught	100
The problems of teachers in Teaching	96.77	Teachers' strong points and weak Points	100
The challenges of the class	100	Students' learning problems	100
Teacher-student relationship	87.09	Teacher-student relationship and interaction patterns	100
-----		Class management/lesson planning	100
-----		Teachers/learners' feelings and Emotions	100
-----		Socio-political factors in teaching	100

Note: P = Percentage

As illustrated in Table 4, in the second-round reflective journals, the participants paid attention to such factors as socio-political issues in teaching, teachers/learners' feelings, and teachers' teaching methods, strategies and their suitability, all of which had gone unnoticed before they attended the consciousness-raising interactive workshop on RJW. In other words, the contents of the second-round journals were found to be more reflection-oriented in comparison to those of the first-round journals. Moreover, the *nature* of some of the issues and activities commonly focused on in both rounds, sometimes changed after the conscious-raising event (e.g., in the first-round journals, the participants only focused on their *problems* in teaching. However, in the second-round journals, they came to reflect over their *positive points* in order to strengthen them further besides contemplating their problems and weak points).

The fifth research question of the study examined the possible contribution of reflection consciousness-raising interactive workshop to the participants' teaching overall (see the second interview question in Appendix 2). The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5  
*Participants' Responses on the Contribution of Reflection Consciousness-Raising Interactive Workshop to their Teaching Quality*

Response	F	P
Raising awareness of what had already been done unsystematically	28	93.2
Helping discover one's inner feelings	25	83.3
Professional development	20	66.6
Identity construction/enhancement	20	66.6
Critical pedagogy integration in teaching	19	63.3
Teacher-student interaction patterns improvement	18	60
Enhancing stream of thought while writing	15	50
Reflecting on reflection while writing	12	40

As shown in Table 5, most of the participants believed in the positive impact of consciousness-raising interactive workshop about RJW on their teaching quality overall. The majority of the participants i.e. (93.2%) believed that they became systematically aware of what they had already been doing unsystematically. In other words, they already practiced some kind of reflective teaching, albeit unconsciously and unsystematically before attending the workshop. However, the workshop made them more conscious of what they were already doing. Eighty three percent of them also came to pay attention to the emotional aspects the consciousness-raising workshop brought them most possibly because when reflective teachers leave their classes, they are likely to struggle against their negative feelings and accompany the positive emotions they have about their classes. Moreover, teachers thought that consciousness-raising interactive workshop on RJW helped them to construct/enhance their identity and develop professionally most probably due to the fact that the teachers' reflectivity process occurred through a step-by-step structured framework mentioned earlier. Moreover, the event caused them to integrate criticality in their classes and improved their interaction patterns respectively. Fifty and forty percent respectively reported that the consciousness-raising workshop contributed to their stream of thought and made them reflect on their reflections while writing.

**Discussion**

The study investigated whether Iranian EFL teachers were familiar with RJW and whether they had already been trained on RJW. Furthermore, attempts were made to explore the possible barriers to RJW, the effect of reflection consciousness-raising interactive workshop on the content quality of Iranian EFL teachers' RJW and the impact of the event on their teaching quality overall. The findings showed that the participants of the present study had only partial familiarity with RJW and that none of them had already been trained on that. Also, they thought that the three groups of 'institutional issues', 'teacher issues' and educational system issues' were among the major barriers to RJW. Moreover, the findings revealed that the consciousness-raising interactive workshop made the participants consider such issues as sociopolitical factors, feelings, emotions, thoughts, etc. in their RJW which had previously been ignored. Finally, the participants of the current study believed that RJW actively contributed to their teaching quality overall in such aspects as professional development, identity construction/enhancement, etc.

The first research question explored whether Iranian EFL teachers were familiar with RJW. It was found that only less than half of the participants were already familiar with RJW only partially. Also, based on the results of the second research question, all the participants unanimously

reported that they had never been trained on RJW previously. Primarily, a feasible, though partial justification, for these findings could be ascribed to the teacher education programs in the country. That is, either the teacher educators might not have been successful in presenting and clarifying the tenets of reflective teaching in general and RJW in particular, or the stakeholders' focus might have mainly been on theories rather than practice. Our reasoning in this respect can be corroborated by Beauchamp's (2014) assertion that the notion of reflection has not been clarified enough by teacher educators; reflection is easier said than done. Supporting this and stating the lack of sufficient opportunities for teachers to get involved in and be trained on the practical side of the issue, one of the participants stated,

*I have been taught to reflect on, in and for action, but just on the white board.*

*We have never had a training course even after our BA level to learn how to teach, let alone how to reflect.*

Another participant said,

*Our professors at university emphasized the importance of reflective teaching even though they never put the theories into practice at least in their classes.*

*Our supervisor in the institute also talks about thinking back on what has been done in the class, but never gives us a sample of reflection or never checks if we keep a diary to do so.*

Along with these interview excerpts, the participants' first-round reflective journals denote that they did not know how to pursue reflection tenets in practice. One of the participants' first-round reflective journal below shows their relative immaturity with regard to RJW before attending the consciousness-raising interactive workshop on reflection:

*Mona's First-round individual reflection:* I have 13 students in my class

which is held on the odd days for one and half hours. In our institute, the *Touchtone* series are taught plus *Oxford Word Skill* as a supplementary book. That day, I entered into the class, I greeted my students warmly.

Then, I went through my lesson plan for the grammar part of unit one of the main book which was about countable and uncountable nouns.

I brought some stuff to my class in order to make the students touch and

understand what they would learn. After eliciting some parts, I wrote all the grammatical points on the board and asked them to do the activities. Afterwards,

I told them to talk about the things that they had in their refrigerators at home. I think this topic was to some extent difficult for me to teach and for my students to learn.

The excerpt above and others of a similar ilk show that the participants' RJW before attending the interactive workshop diverges considerably from their RJW after attending the workshop. The results of this part of the current study might also be rooted in the gap existing between theory and practice in the educational system of the country. Authenticating this, Soodmand Afshar and Farahani (2018), whose findings showed that Iranian EFL teachers had only restricted familiarity with reflective teaching, attributed the reason to the gap existing between theory and practice in the nation's educational system. They maintain that reflection cannot be left to take care of itself, but it needs to be taught and teachers should be trained, so that it could be readily employed in the actual context of the classroom. This stands in sharp contrast to the tenets of post-method era and the stance of such scholars in the field as Kumaravadivelu (2006) who asserts that teachers need to "theorize from their practice and practice what they theorize" (p. 173).

The third research question investigated the participants' perception of possible barriers to Iranian EFL teachers' RJW. We identified the main themes and common patterns of the responses and classified them into the three groups of 'institutional issues' (e.g., lack of training, rigid rules, and teachers' low salary), 'teacher issues' (e.g., teachers' lack of time, teachers' unfamiliarity with the concept, and teachers' lack of motivation) and 'educational system issues' (e.g., the existence of a conflict between the educational system teachers experienced when they were students at school and the new system in which they are teaching).

As mentioned before in discussing the findings of the first research question of the study, there is a gap between the theories on reflection and the actual classroom practices. This incongruence between theory and practice on reflection might have originated from the inhibitors which are thought to impede reflection. The participants of the present study stated that they were partially aware of the tenets of reflection, but they could hardly pursue them in practice because of such inhibitors as lack of sufficient knowledge of and familiarity with the concept, lack of training on how to apply the concept in practice, lack of motivation, lack of time, lack of institutes' cooperation with them, rigid rules of the institutes, their low salary, existence of a conflict between their old educational habits and the new educational systems. The results here are consistent with those of Soodmand Afshar and Farahani (2018) mentioned earlier, who also found that the three groups of inhibitors impeding reflective practice of Iranian EFL teachers included 'affective-emotional' (e.g., stress, lack of confidence, etc.), 'cognitive' (e.g., tendency for memorization) and 'learning situation' (e.g., teacher-centered classes) factors. In the same vein, Zulfikar and Mujiburrahman's (2018) findings show that their participants considered time constraint as a hindrance to their reflective thought and practice.

Likewise, Moradkhani and Shirazizadeh (2017), mentioned earlier, also found that such factors as lack of 'knowledge of reflection', 'teachers' negative attitudes toward teaching', 'high institutional demands', 'lack of availability of resources', and 'lack of collegial support' hindered Iranian EFL teachers' reflective practices. It could thus be argued that providing a sustained guidance for reflection is crucial, but difficult. Corroborating this, Yuan and Mak (2018), argue that due to the elusive nature of reflection, its application seems to be difficult. Hence, teaching the student teachers to learn how to enact the principles of reflection is deemed essential.

The fourth research question investigated the contribution of reflection consciousness-raising interactive workshop to individual and collective RJW. The findings from the comparison of the two rounds of journals showed that the workshop had positive effects on the participants' both individual and collective RJW.

Here, we present the second round reflective journal written by Mona, one of the participants whose first-round journal was presented earlier in the study.

### *Mona's second-round individual reflection: The event itself and Recollection*

#### of the event:

When I entered into the class, I *greeted my students* warmly  
*in order to develop a good rapport with them*. I have always loved this part of my  
class as most of the observers admire the rapport I develop in my classes. Then,  
I went through my lesson plan for the grammar part of unit three of one of the  
*Touchstone* series. *Before going to the class, I thought about teaching* the present perfect.  
So, I decided to ask my students about their experiences during their lives.  
And I elicited whether they knew this grammatical structure or not. Next,  
I focused on the structure of present perfect simple. And I drew students' attention  
to the activities of the book while asking for *self-correction, peer correction, or*  
*teacher correction*. Finally, *I told my students to talk about their experiences*  
*during their lives to get involved in a real situation even about the experiences that they*  
*had never talked due to all the forbidden topics that are there outside which I believe should be*  
*addressed in the class*.

#### Review and response to the event:

Regarding the lesson plan stages, I think this session, *I could have provided* the students with better freer practice at the end of my teaching. *When I thought back upon today's class* [when I taught present perfect simple], I asked the students to talk about only their experiences. Using this grammatical point in a real context, the students could think about a better topic. Also, *I could have copied* extra activities from other books to give students a broader view in this regard. Additionally, whenever I teach grammar, I noticed my explanations were not clear enough as I [now] feel my students were confused. Sometimes, I think grammar teaching is the most complex part of teaching English! So, *I should concentrate on this weakness and overcome it*. In spite of all the negative points as stated, I think the atmosphere of today's class was great because *I tried to create a friendly condition* for my students and myself as well. Something important should be added here that *thinking about the issue that I must write a reflective journal encourages me to teach enthusiastically!*☺

Comparing the two rounds of Mona's reflective journals, we understand how she became conscious of the framework and all the aspects and contents which needed to be incorporated in her reflective journal. Mona's use of such grammatical structures as '*could have provided*' and '*could have copied*' and such expressions as '*I should concentrate on this weakness and overcome it*', and '*I tried to create a friendly condition for my students and myself*', revealing her willingness to concentrate on her own

and her students' *feelings* and *emotions* about the class, all show that the consciousness-raising activity on RJW worked in practice. Thus, their primary immaturity about RJW might be related to their lack of training in reflective teaching in general and RJW in particular. Russell (2005) attributed similar results of his study to the fact that teachers do not have specific skills to develop reflection, the results of which is a "haphazard reflective practice for the sake of compliance" (Munalim & Gonong, 2019, p. 122). Likewise, Zulfikar and Mujiburrahman (2018), comparing the two rounds of journals written by the participants, asserted that in the first round, the participants primarily focused on the events happening in the class including teaching materials, teaching methods, and teaching problems. Their results resemble the findings of the present study in which the two rounds of journals written were basically different from each other and that there was a shift of focus in the second-round journals.

The fifth research question of the study explored how reflection consciousness-raising interactive workshop contributed to the participants' teaching quality overall. The interviewees asserted that the workshop helped them become systematically aware of what they had already been doing unsystematically, that they now paid due attention to the students' inner feelings, that they now thought that RJW could lead to their professional development and identity formation, that they now injected criticality into their classes, and that they now thought more while writing the reflective journals i.e., they reflected upon their reflections. Of course, they thought it was difficult at the beginning to do so, but practice made it perfect. They also thought that the collective RJW increasingly enhanced their interaction with their colleagues. Here is the last part of what one of the teachers stated in the collective journal writing (i.e. the focus-group interview) which supports what we mentioned in this respect:

Thus, to round off [the discussion], we think holding such sessions by allotting at least one hour a week to think back and reflect upon what [we] have done in different classes for various parts to be taught like grammar, conversation, reading, writing, etc. will be great. Our break times are short, so we cannot talk about such things then. What's more is that in such [collective reflection] sessions, we can collaborate with our colleagues; a fruitful one!

Furthermore, the teachers had positive points of view towards the effect of such workshops on both their collective RJW as well as on their individual RJW. We might thus be able to argue that the consciousness-raising activity led to development with regard to both individual and collective journal writing especially the latter wherein the teachers inspired each other in terms of both reflective teaching and RJW. The results of the current study in this respect might be supported by Lee's (2008) argument that the interactions and dialogues created by collective journal writing seem to make teachers aware of the key issues in educational contexts and the pedagogical practices. This awareness results from their developed reflective competence, which in turn, could arise, at least partially, out of the presence and contributions of others (Russell, 2005).

Additionally, the findings of the interview showed that the teachers thought RJW led to their teaching identity construction. This finding is supported by the arguments of Walkington (2005) who maintained, "Reflections on actions assist in the development of the functional role of a teacher, and also provide strategies to nurture the ongoing development of a teacher identity that has been shaped, and will continue to be shaped over a long period of time" (p. 59). This line of reasoning can be supported by the remarks of one of the participants' who stated,

*At the time that I wrote my reflective journals or even in the class that I simultaneously thought about my teaching, I understood 'who I am'. I saw myself as [a] teacher who is there in charge of a class. I was no longer my daddy's girl there; rather I was a real teacher responsible for all the events in that class. I think if I stick to reflective journal writing, I will get to know my identity much better than today.*

This stance can be corroborated by the ideas of Freese (2006) who considers reflection as a crucial factor in teachers' identity formation. Highlighting the impact of reflective teaching on teachers' professional identity construction, Urzúa and Vásquez (2008) hold that reflection is a vital part of identity development in general and professional identity construction in particular.

Moreover, the participants thought that the workshop on RJW made them able to think about their actions before, after and during the class. These findings can be justified with teachers' time allocation to address their weaknesses and strengths, their students' needs and their contextual demands. In addition, the participants believed that while writing reflective journals, they reflected more and longer over what they had done. In agreement with this line of reasoning, Farrell (2012) argues that one important dimension of RJW is the act of writing itself which lasts for a longer period of time. That is, the teachers pause to think more about what they are going to write in their reflective journals. In this sense, they come to understand their ideas, practices, etc. (Farrell, 2013a) which can, in turn, lead to thinking about other aspects of teaching.

Furthermore, as stated previously, the participants of the present study believed that RJW led to their professional development over time. The results of this part of the current study seem to be in compliance with those of Zulfikar and Mujiburrahman (2018) who found that professional development was a positive aspect or a consequence of RJW. They maintain that through the medium of RJW, teachers make progress in their teaching practices and gradually become professionally developed. Contrary to what was found in the current study where professional development was achieved through RJW, Turhan and Kirkgöz (2018) found no strong impact of reflectivity on professional development. The results of both studies are yet partially consistent.

Finally, our findings showed that expression of teachers' inner feelings in their reflective journals was a pleasant part for them which had already been ignored before the consciousness-raising activity on RJW. Within this line of reasoning, Beauchamp (2014) argues that the inner life of teachers such as their feelings, values, beliefs and emotions should be addressed in teacher education which, we assume, can be accomplished through the tenets of reflective teaching in general and RJW in particular. In this way, the teachers can also take into account their students' feelings at school which forms a small society in its own right i.e., schools, institutes, universities, etc. are themselves societies in miniature which finally form the society at large, an argument also supported by the reasoning of Körkkö et al. (2016) who also believe in the social impact and the transformative role of reflection.

## Conclusion and implications

Our findings indicated that the participants became acquainted with the principles of RJW after attending a consciousness-raising interactive workshop on the topic. Furthermore, the barriers to RJW were identified as 'institutional issues', 'teacher issues' and 'educational system issues'. The results also indicated that reflection consciousness-raising interactive workshop had positive impact on the participants' individual and collective RJW and their teaching overall. In sum, we found out that EFL teachers could and should be trained on reflection in general and RJW in particular through interactive workshops or other consciousness-raising activities on reflection. Corroborating our stance here in this regard, Russell (2005) points out that reflection *can*, not only be taught, but it *should* also be taught explicitly, directly and thoughtfully.

Some implications might arise from the findings of the current study. Firstly, as the results showed teachers had not already been trained on reflectivity and RJW. Therefore, foreign language education policy makers, curriculum developers, teacher educators and trainers, and institute managers should prioritize, in their programs, reflective teaching in general and RJW in



particular and provide opportunities for the teachers to become acquainted with such reflective practices as RJW through attending interactive workshops, collegial support groups, peer coaching, etc. In addition, the barriers impeding RJW as found in the present study need to be obviated. The institute managers are also suggested to provide teachers with opportunities to meet their colleagues and develop collective reflective journals towards which the participants of the current study held more positive views. Finally, teachers should be made aware that what they have learned about reflectivity needs to be put into practice which would lead to success in other aspects of their profession since the findings of the study showed that reflectivity and RJW worked.

Further research could be carried out to investigate students' views towards their teachers' reflectivity after holding such workshops and whether reflectivity would affect their teachers' job performance.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that, the present study was not without such limitations as the difficulty in collecting journals initially as the teachers seemed more interested in the sole process of teaching rather than writing journals and because they had not been previously trained on how to keep reflective journals; the old habits die hard. However, they gradually became more and more interested in RJW and came to cooperate fully with the researchers towards the end of the data collection process.

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### Appendices

#### *Appendix 1: The first semi-structured interview conducted before running the workshop*

1. Are you familiar with reflective journal writing at all? To what extent?
2. Have you ever had any kinds of training on reflective journal writing?

#### *Appendix 2: The second semi-structured interview conducted after running the workshop*

1. What do you think are some barriers to reflective journal writing?
2. How do you think the consciousness-raising interactive workshop on reflective journal writing contributed to your teaching quality? Do you think the impact was positive? Why? How?