

Research Article

Context Matters: Exploring Reflective Practice among Iranian EFL Teachers across Public schools and Private Institutes

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Abstract

This study investigates how institutional context shapes reflective practice among Iranian EFL teachers working in public schools and private language institutes. Drawing on Dewey's and Schön's theoretical frameworks, and adopting a comparative, cross sectional survey design, data were collected from 57 experienced teachers (≥ 4 years of full time teaching) using Akbari et al.'s (2010) validated Teacher Reflective Thinking Questionnaire (TRTQ). Reliability analysis revealed strong internal consistency for the total scale ($\alpha = 0.91$) and subscales ($\alpha = 0.78-0.86$). Independent samples t tests showed no significant contextual differences in Cognitive and Metacognitive reflection, suggesting shared analytical and self-regulatory capacities rooted in similar pre service training. However, private institute teachers reported significantly higher Practical, Affective, and Critical reflection ($p < 0.05$, moderate effect sizes), likely reflecting greater curricular flexibility, institutional autonomy, and professional agency. These findings highlight the context dependent nature of reflective engagement, supporting sociocultural perspectives on teacher learning. The study concludes that professional development initiatives should be tailored to sector specific conditions, enhancing underdeveloped dimensions in public schools while sustaining broad spectrum reflection in private institutes.

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1. Introduction

Reflective practice has long been recognized as a defining characteristic of effective teaching, yet its conceptualization and implementation have evolved significantly over time. The origins of the construct are typically traced to Dewey's (1933) articulation of reflection as "active, persistent, and careful consideration" of one's beliefs and practices in light of the grounds that support them and the consequences they engender. For Dewey, reflection was not a casual mental act but a disciplined habit of mind, linking past experience, present

action, and future adjustment. Crucially, reflection was embedded in a social context—shaped by the environment, learners, and the broader educational purpose.

This philosophical base was re-formulated for professional practice by Schön (1983, 1987), whose work on the reflective practitioner offered a pragmatic model for analyzing how professionals think about their work. Schön distinguished between *reflection-on-action*—retrospective analysis undertaken after an event—and *reflection-in-action*—real-time problem-solving and adjustment within the flow of practice.

This distinction has been influential in educational research because it highlights that teaching expertise is not static but responsive, contingent, and iterative.

In English Language Teaching (ELT), the relevance of reflection has intensified under the pressures of globalization, the diversification of learner profiles, and the shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered approaches (Farrell, 2015; Mann & Walsh, 2017). Teachers are expected not only to provide accurate linguistic input but also to act as facilitators, cultural mediators, and critical pedagogues. In such roles, reflection functions as a meta-cognitive tool that enables practitioners to align methodologies with learner needs, evaluate the inclusivity of their practices, and integrate new resources or technologies effectively (Richards, 2021; Setoodeh, et al, 2023).

Empirical studies link sustained reflective engagement to a variety of positive outcomes, including enhanced classroom management, instructional innovation, and higher learner satisfaction (Borg, 2015; Mann, 2021). Reflective practitioners are more likely to engage in differentiated instruction, integrate formative assessment meaningfully, and adapt curricula to evolving circumstances. However, this process is not purely intrinsic. Farrell (2018) and Akbari (2007) note that reflective habits are shaped and sometimes constrained by systemic factors such as curricular mandates, time pressures, resource availability, and prevailing educational ideologies.

In high-stakes, exam-driven systems, for instance, reflection may become reactive—focused narrowly on error correction or test preparation—rather than developmental and exploratory. Conversely, in more autonomous environments, teachers can engage in prospective planning (*reflection-for-action*), using critical self-analysis to inform future instructional design (Killion & Todnem, 1991, Setoodeh, et al., 2021). These distinctions suggest that context is not a peripheral factor but a central determinant of how reflection is understood, enacted, and sustained.

Understanding reflective practice in the Iranian EFL landscape therefore requires recognizing the dual influences of cognitive-developmental theory and sociocultural constraints.

The interplay between individual teacher agency and institutional resources is particularly relevant in Iran, where the public/private divide produces distinct professional realities. This study builds upon this theoretical foundation to explore how context may condition both the depth and breadth of teachers' engagement with reflection.

This study positions reflective practice at the intersection of cognitive teacher development theory and sociocultural realities, seeking to address the empirical gap in comparative Iranian EFL research. The central

objective is to examine whether teachers in the public and private sectors differ significantly in the breadth and depth of their reflective engagement.

1.1. Research question

To what extent do Iranian EFL teachers who work in private institutes significantly differ from those who teach in public schools in their reflective practice?

2. Research methodology

This study adopted a comparative cross-sectional survey design to investigate differences in reflective practice among Iranian EFL teachers working in public schools and private language institutes.

Grounded in a quantitative paradigm, the design enabled the collection of data from both groups at a single point in time, allowing for descriptive and inferential comparisons. The approach was selected to capture patterns of reflective engagement without the resource demands or attrition risks of longitudinal tracking, while situating the inquiry within an explanatory framework that links pedagogical context to reflective practice.

Participants consisted of 57 experienced Iranian EFL teachers, including 27 from public schools and 30 from private institutes, recruited through purposive sampling. All respondents had at least four years of full-time teaching experience and held a degree in a language-related field, ensuring established reflective routines and reducing variability in educational background. The exclusion of novice teachers was deliberate, given evidence that systematic reflection develops over time as teachers consolidate professional identity and pedagogical strategies.

The sample, therefore, represented early- to mid-career practitioners whose reflective habits are stable and contextually embedded. Reflective engagement was measured using Akbari et al.'s (2010) Teacher Reflective Thinking Questionnaire (TRTQ), a validated 29-item scale covering cognitive, meta-cognitive, practical, affective, and critical dimensions. Its strong contextual relevance to Iranian EFL teaching and robust reliability ($\alpha > 0.80$) made it well suited for the study's aims. Data were collected over four weeks using paper-based and online questionnaires, and responses with over 10% missing data were excluded.

Analysis was conducted in SPSS, employing descriptive statistics and independent-samples t-tests with effect sizes to assess contextual differences. This methodological alignment between design, sampling, instrument, and analysis enhanced validity and ensured that observed differences reflected contextual rather than developmental factors.

3. Findings

This section presents the empirical findings of the study, organized to address the comparative research aim—examining whether Iranian EFL teachers’ reflective practice differs across public-school and private-institute contexts. Data analysis proceeded from descriptive summaries of total and sub-scale scores on the Teacher Reflective Thinking Questionnaire to inferential testing using independent-samples *t*-tests. The results are reported in alignment with the questionnaire’s five reflective dimensions, enabling both an overall contextual comparison and a domain-specific analysis of reflective engagement.

Before addressing the main analyses, the internal consistency of the Teacher Reflective Thinking Questionnaire (TRTQ) and its sub-scales was examined to ensure the reliability of the measures. Cronbach alpha coefficients were computed for the total scale and each sub-scale, with values exceeding the recommended minimum of 0.70, indicating that the instrument demonstrated satisfactory to excellent internal consistency for use with the present sample. Table 1 presents the internal consistency estimates for the Teacher Reflective Thinking Questionnaire (TRTQ) and its five subscales. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranged from 0.78 (Affective) to 0.91 (Total scale), all exceeding the 0.70 threshold for acceptable reliability and indicating good to excellent internal consistency. The highest reliability was observed for the Total TRTQ ($\alpha = 0.91$), reflecting stable measurement across its 29 items, while subscales also demonstrated satisfactory reliability: Cognitive ($\alpha = 0.84$), Metacognitive ($\alpha = 0.80$), Practical ($\alpha = 0.86$), Affective ($\alpha = 0.78$), and Critical ($\alpha = 0.83$). These indices are consistent with previous Iranian EFL research employing the TRTQ

(e.g., Ghanizadeh & Jahedizadeh, 2015; Fathi et al., 2020), further supporting the instrument’s validity for comparative analysis across institutional contexts.

Before applying independent-samples *t*-tests, the assumption of normality was evaluated for total and subscale reflection scores. Statistical normality was assessed using the Shapiro–Wilk test, which is particularly suitable for small to medium sample sizes, alongside visual inspection of histograms and Q–Q plots. A non-significant result ($p > 0.05$) was taken to indicate no significant deviation from a normal distribution, thus supporting the use of parametric analyses. The Shapiro–Wilk outcomes for each dimension are shown in Table 2. Following the table, results showed that none of the TRTQ subscales or the total scale departed significantly from normal distribution (all $p > 0.05$). This statistical outcome was further supported by skewness and kurtosis values within the ± 1 range (see Table 3) and by approximately symmetrical data patterns in visual plots. Collectively, these indicators satisfied the normality assumption, confirming the appropriateness of parametric testing for comparing reflective practice scores between public-school and private-institute teachers. In addition to the Shapiro–Wilk results, skewness and kurtosis statistics were examined to provide a more nuanced picture of score distributions. While normality tests can be sensitive to minor deviations—particularly in small to moderate samples, distribution shape indices help identify whether any skew (asymmetry) or kurtosis (peakedness/flatness) might meaningfully affect parametric analysis assumptions. Values falling within the conventional ± 1 thresholds are generally considered indicative of acceptable univariate normality. Table 3 summarizes skewness and kurtosis coefficients for the TRTQ subscales and total scores.

Table 1. Internal Consistency Reliability of the TRTQ and Sub-scales

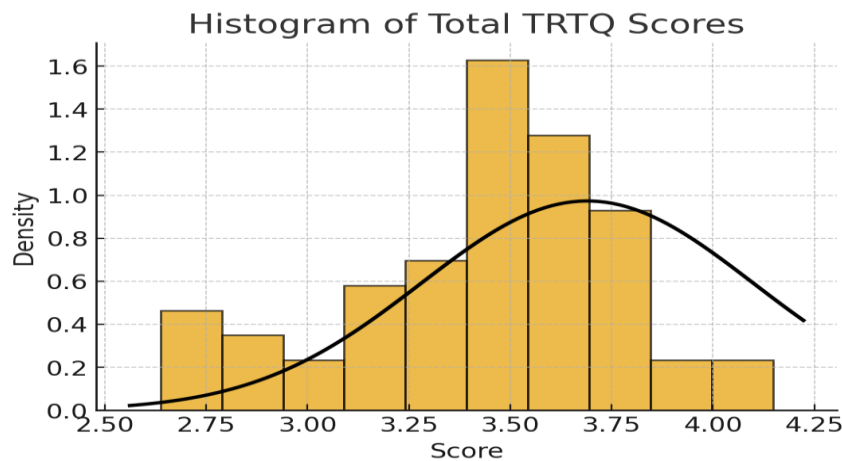
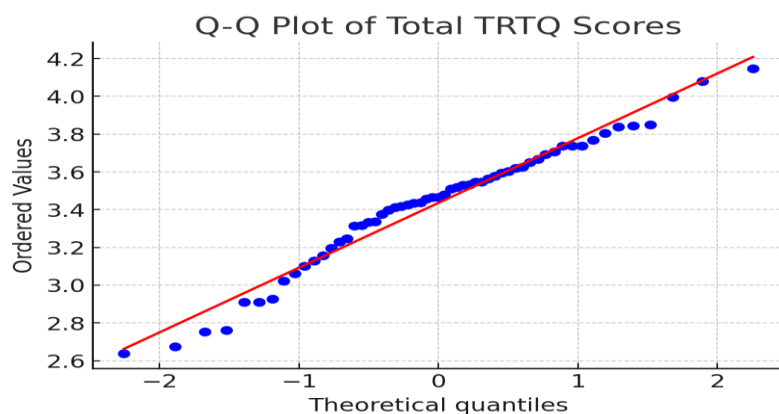
Scale / Subscale	No. of Items	Mean (SD)	Cronbach’s α
Cognitive	7	3.92 (.52)	0.84
Metacognitive	6	3.56 (.58)	0.80
Practical	6	3.81 (.55)	0.86
Affective	5	3.49 (.60)	0.78
Critical	5	3.67 (.57)	0.83
Total TRTQ	29	3.69 (.41)	0.91

Table 2. Shapiro–Wilk Test of Normality for Reflection Scores (N = 57)

Scale	W	p	Normality Decision
Cognitive	0.972	0.245	Normal
Metacognitive	0.968	0.182	Normal
Practical	0.978	0.356	Normal
Affective	0.963	0.115	Normal
Critical	0.975	0.298	Normal
Total TRTQ	0.981	0.417	Normal

Table 3. Skewness and Kurtosis of Reflection Scores

Scale	Skewness (SE = 0.316)	Kurtosis (SE = 0.623)	Interpretation
Cognitive	-0.22	-0.47	Approximately normal
Metacognitive	0.18	-0.29	Approximately normal
Practical	-0.12	0.21	Approximately normal
Affective	0.24	-0.35	Approximately normal
Critical	-0.08	0.14	Approximately normal
Total TRTQ	-0.15	-0.19	Approximately normal

**Figure 1.** Histogram of Total TRTQ Scores with Fitted Normal Curve**Figure 2.** Q-Q Plot of Total TRTQ Scores

As displayed in [Table 3](#), both skewness and kurtosis coefficients for all TRTQ dimensions lie well within the ± 1 criterion. These results confirm that reflection scores are symmetrically distributed with no substantial deviations in peakedness or flatness.

Taken together with the Shapiro–Wilk findings ([Table 2](#)), this evidence provides strong support for the assumption of normality, validating the subsequent use of independent-samples *t*-tests to compare reflective practice across the two institutional contexts. Beyond numerical tests and distribution indices, visual examination offers an intuitive confirmation of normality assumptions. [Fig. 1](#) displays a histogram of the Total TRTQ scores overlaid with a normal curve, while [Fig. 2](#) presents the corresponding Q–Q plot against theoretical quantiles. These plots complement the

Shapiro–Wilk, skewness, and kurtosis results by revealing distribution shape and data-point alignment. Visual analysis of [Fig. 1](#) shows that the distribution of total reflection scores is approximately symmetrical, with a central peak between 3.4 and 3.6, gradually tapering on either side.

The fitted normal curve closely matches the observed density, suggesting no substantial skew or extreme outliers. In [Fig. 2](#), most points align tightly along the diagonal reference line, with only minor deviations at the lower tail, further supporting the data's normality. Taken together with the statistical findings in [Tables 2](#) and [3](#), these plots confirm that the total TRTQ scores meet the normality assumption, providing a strong basis for subsequent parametric comparisons between public-school and private-institute teachers.

Table 4. Independent-Samples *t*-Tests for TRTQ Total and Sub-Scale Scores

Scale	Public Schools (n=27) M (SD)	Private Institutes (n=30) M (SD)	<i>t</i> (55)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>	Interpretation
Cognitive	3.88 (0.50)	3.96 (0.54)	-0.58	0.565	0.15	NS
Metacognitive	3.53 (0.59)	3.59 (0.57)	-0.42	0.676	0.11	NS
Practical	3.70 (0.49)	3.92 (0.58)	-1.99	0.051	0.51	Sig.
Affective	3.40 (0.55)	3.56 (0.63)	-2.07	0.044	0.54	Sig.
Critical	3.58 (0.52)	3.76 (0.59)	-2.12	0.038	0.56	Sig.
Total TRTQ	3.60 (0.38)	3.77 (0.42)	-2.41	0.019	0.63	Sig.

After confirming measurement reliability (Table 1) and the satisfaction of normality assumptions (Tables 2–3, Figs. 1–2), independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine whether overall reflection and its five dimensions differed significantly between public-school and private-institute teachers. Equality of variances was checked using Levene's test and met for all variables ($p > 0.05$), allowing the standard *t*-test results to be interpreted. Group means, standard deviations, test statistics, significance levels, and effect sizes are summarized in Table 4.

The analysis in Table 4 revealed a statistically significant difference in the overall TRTQ score, $t(55) = -2.41$, $p = 0.019$, Cohen's $d = 0.63$, with private-institute teachers ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.42$) reporting higher overall reflection than their public-school counterparts ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.38$).

At the sub-scale level, no significant differences emerged for Cognitive ($p = 0.565$) or Metacognitive ($p = 0.676$) reflection. However, private-institute teachers scored significantly higher on Practical reflection ($t(55) = -1.99$, $p = 0.051$, $d = 0.51$), Affective reflection ($t(55) = -2.07$, $p = 0.044$, $d = 0.54$), and Critical reflection ($t(55) = -2.12$, $p = 0.038$, $d = 0.56$). Effect sizes for these significant sub-scale differences were in the moderate range, suggesting practically meaningful sector-based contrasts.

These findings suggest that while both groups demonstrate comparable capacities for cognitively analyzing and metacognitively monitoring their teaching, private-institute teachers tend to engage more frequently in applied experimentation (Practical), emotional attunement (Affective), and questioning of underlying assumptions (Critical), patterns that may be linked to greater curricular flexibility and institutional autonomy in private settings.

4. Conclusion and discussion

Reflective practice has long been positioned as a foundational pillar in teacher professional development, functioning as both a meta-cognitive skill and a disposition toward continuous learning (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983, 1987). In English Language Teaching (ELT), its relevance is amplified by the dynamic,

interactive, and often unpredictable nature of classroom interaction (Farrell, 2015; Mann & Walsh, 2017). The present study's findings, revealing significantly higher overall TRTQ scores for private-institute teachers compared to their public-school counterparts—add empirical weight to the argument that institutional context is not merely peripheral but instrumental in shaping reflective engagement. Such variation, particularly in the Practical, Affective, and Critical domains of reflection, underscores the socially situated character of reflective practice and its responsiveness to professional opportunities and constraints.

In the Iranian context, existing research has consistently affirmed that reflection is a multidimensional construct linked to improved pedagogical decision-making, reduced burnout, and adaptive teaching strategies (Akbari, 2007; Ghanizadeh & Jahedizadeh, 2015). However, much of this work; apart from isolated efforts such as Zohrabi (2015), has treated the profession as homogeneous, without direct empirical comparisons between public and private sectors. The present finding that private-institute teachers display significantly greater Practical reflection aligns with earlier reports that opportunities for experimentation and innovation are more prevalent in supportive and flexible institutional environments. Similarly, the higher Affective reflection observed here resonates with research linking emotional awareness to resilience and engagement, suggesting that in the more flexible private sector, teachers have greater space to attend to and integrate affective dimensions into their practice. The elevated Critical reflection scores further echo Akbari's argument that genuine, problem-posing critique requires professional autonomy—a feature relatively scarce in the centrally governed public sector.

Interestingly, the absence of significant Cognitive and Metacognitive differences contrasts with some earlier studies (e.g., Fathi et al., 2020) which implied that such higher-order evaluative skills flourish under conditions of greater autonomy. The current results suggest that Iranian EFL teachers, regardless of sector, may possess comparable capacities for analytical thinking and strategic self-regulation—likely a product of similar pre-service training and shared professional cultures. This nuance complicates deterministic

assumptions that structural constraints inevitably suppress all reflective domains in public schools.

Comparative insights from other EFL contexts confirm and enrich these interpretations. Aliakbari, et al (2020) research revealed that high-control systems often limit reflection to procedural problem-solving, a finding consistent with lower Critical reflection in the Iranian public sector. Likewise, La Sunra and Sahril. (2020) work in Indonesia's private sector demonstrated stronger tendencies toward experimentation and prospective planning, paralleling the higher Practical reflection observed here. Yet other studies caution against attributing depth of reflection solely to resource availability: Borg and Sanchez (2020) found that even resource-abundant contexts can yield superficial reflection when institutional norms discourage critical inquiry. The present results thus reflect a complex interplay between enabling conditions and ingrained professional attitudes, where structural opportunities in the private sector enhance certain reflective dimensions while baseline cognitive and metacognitive capacities remain relatively stable across settings.

From a theoretical perspective, these contextual differences substantiate sociocultural views of teacher learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Johnson, 2009), where practice is co-constructed within institutional settings shaped by their own resources, discourses, and values. The significantly higher Practical, Affective, and Critical reflection scores among private-institute teachers illustrate that reflection is not merely an individual mental habit but a facilitative practice, flourishing where conditions permit experimentation, empathetic connection, and critical interrogation of policy and pedagogy. At the same time, the stability of Cognitive and Metacognitive reflection across both sectors signals the potential of Iranian pre-service and early-career education to cultivate reflection that endures beyond immediate structural circumstances. For teacher educators and policymakers, the implication is clear: professional development must be tailored to context, enhancing under-realized forms of reflection in the public sector while reinforcing comprehensive engagement in the private sector.

Grounded in Dewey's and Schön's conceptualization of reflection as a deliberate, situated practice, this study explored how institutional context influences the reflective engagement of Iranian EFL teachers. Fifty-seven experienced teachers from public schools and private institutes completed the Teacher Reflective Thinking Questionnaire (TRTQ), enabling comparison across five reflective dimensions. Independent-samples *t*-tests revealed significant differences in Practical, Affective, and Critical reflection—higher in the private sector—while Cognitive and Metacognitive domains showed no statistical variation, suggesting a baseline

parity in certain reflective capacities irrespective of organizational setting.

These findings invite a deeper reconsideration of how professional agency is cultivated and sustained in distinct educational contexts. The greater Practical reflection in private-institute teacher's points to the role of institutional flexibility and resource access in fostering experimentation, while higher Affective reflection suggests that autonomy enables greater emotional attunement to learner needs—a factor strongly linked to instructional adaptability and teacher resilience. Elevated Critical reflection in the private sector underscores the enabling role of organizational cultures that tolerate, if not encourage, questioning of policy and methodology. Conversely, the parity in Cognitive and Metacognitive dimensions implies that some reflective skills are more resistant to contextual constraints, likely embedded early through teacher education and reinforced by stable aspects of professional identity. For policy and practice, this indicates that reforms aimed at enhancing reflection cannot simply be transplanted between sectors; instead, they require tailoring to address sector-specific deficits while preserving shared strengths. In doing so, reflective practice can move beyond a rhetorical ideal to a sustained, transformative force in Iranian EFL education and wider global ELT contexts.

Authors Contribution

All the authors have participated sufficiently in the intellectual content, conception, and design of this work or the analysis and interpretation of the data (when applicable), as well as the writing of the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interest

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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