



Collaborative reflection as a means to improve teachers' reflective skills: a community of practice perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at using collaborative reflection to see how it impacts teachers' breadth and depth of reflection on teaching practice. To do so, as a part of an in-house professional development program of two schools of languages in Iran, eight teachers attended four sessions of collaborative reflection in which they focused on teacher talk. In these sessions, they wrote a reflective note about a teaching session they had observed for 20 minutes, engaged in a discussion with their peers for an additional 30 minutes, and wrote another reflective note after the sessions in another 20 minutes. Their reflective notes were compared to find possible differences. To corroborate the data, the teachers all completed narrative frames and attended semi-structured interviews in which they discussed any changes in their thoughts and the reasons for the changes. The gathered data were analyzed using in-depth thematic analysis, which involved iterative coding and theme identification to uncover differences in reflective depth and diversity. The findings indicated that collaborative reflection significantly enhanced teachers' reflective skills, leading to more practical, and more diverse reflections. This study suggested that incorporating collaborative reflection in professional development programs can foster critical thinking and continuous improvement among language teachers.

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Introduction

Reflection, as a process of thinking deeply about a particular experience or event to gain a better understanding of its meaning and significance, has long been recognized as a cornerstone of educational practice (Dewey, 1933). In an era characterized by rapid technological advancements and shifting educational paradigms, the ability to reflect on one's practices is essential for teachers to adapt and improve their skills and performance continuously (Farrell, 2022).

According to Brookfield (2017), reflection in teaching refers to the deliberate and continuous process of questioning and evaluating the assumptions that underpin our teaching practices. Teachers often operate based on deep-seated beliefs and guiding principles that help them navigate new situations. Reflective practice enables teachers not only to assess their effectiveness but also to identify areas for

growth and development (Larrivee, 2000). Furthermore, by engaging in reflective thought, teachers can transform their experiences into valuable insights which will allow them to refine their teaching approaches and meet the diverse needs of their students better (Farrell, 2018). This ongoing cycle of reflection can lead to improved student outcomes, as teachers who regularly engage in reflective practices are more likely to implement innovative strategies and foster a supportive learning environment.

Recently, reflection has become a prominent focus in teacher education and existing literature reveals a complex relationship between reflective practices and their impact on professional growth. Various studies underscore the benefits of reflection in developing teaching skills (Anani Sarab & Mardian, 2023; Beauchamp, 2015; Saiz-Linares & Susinos-Rada, 2020). However, some scholars question its effectiveness. They argue that many teachers struggle to engage in meaningful reflective practices without adequate support and guidance (Clarà et al., 2019). Ultimately, addressing these challenges is crucial for maximizing the potential benefits of reflection in teacher education and promoting sustained professional growth.

One viable option is collaborative reflection which involves educators reflecting on their experiences together, sharing diverse perspectives, and co-constructing meaning (Baird, 2004; Hansen & Mendzheritskaya, 2024). By coming together in this way, groups of teachers can critically examine their teaching practices, discuss challenges, and celebrate successes. This process not only fosters a culture of continuous professional development (PD) (Zeichner & Liston, 2013) but also enhances critical engagement with teaching methodologies, making it a valuable component of teacher education.

Given this context, the present study aims to investigate the role of collaborative reflection in enhancing teachers' reflective skills by comparing their reflective notes before and after engaging in collaborative practices. Additionally, the study incorporates interviews and narrative inquiry as supplementary data sources to provide a richer understanding of the impact of collaborative reflection. Specifically, it seeks to explore whether teachers can attain a more comprehensive understanding of their teaching practices and develop more critical thinking regarding their methodologies and strategies following collaborative reflection. Through the lens of the Community of Practice framework, which focuses on engagement, imagination, and alignment, this research tries to illuminate the transformative potential of collaborative reflection in teacher education. Finally, it aims to contribute new insights to the existing body of literature and fill a gap in understanding how collaborative reflection can improve teachers' PD practices.

Literature review

The concept of reflection is an old concept that can be found in the classic philosophical literature of ancient Greece such as Plato. However, its formal articulation in education dates back to Dewey (1933) when he defined it as a specific type of thinking, characterized both as a process – something that occurs and continues – and as a product – an activity aimed at solving problems. Then, it was Schön (1983) who expanded this concept and introduced two popular terms regarding it: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. While the former involves reflection occurring during the action, the latter involves reflection that happens after the event has taken place.

The advent of this concept in second language teacher education is not new; however, it gained momentum with the emergence of post-method era (Kumaravadivelu, 2001) when the focus in teacher education moved away from searching for the most effective teaching method to recognizing the intricate nature of foreign language instruction. This leads to the integration of reflective practice as a major component of teachers' PD. In the same vein and in exploring post-method teacher education attributes, Kamali (2014, 2021) claimed that teachers need to *metamorphose* to be able to be updated with new developments in the field taking different roles. To him, reflection is a critical tool to achieve this.

In the Iranian context, reflective practice has gained attention as a potential avenue for enhancing teaching effectiveness. For instance, Abdar and Shafaei (2022) explored the relationship between reflective thinking and teaching style among Iranian EFL teachers by finding a positive correlation between the two and suggested that reflective teachers were more adaptive and responsive to student needs. In another study in an Iranian context, Kurosh et al. (2020) interestingly found that reflective practice is more beneficial in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) field. They examined self-efficacy and reflective practice across various disciplines including EFL, concluding that while EFL teachers demonstrated a strong link between self-efficacy and reflection, teachers in other disciplines did not. This finding highlights the unique role of reflective practice within EFL contexts and underscores the need for discipline-specific training programs. Weisi and Salari (2024) extended this line of inquiry by investigating the relationship between teacher mindfulness, reflective practice, and PD in Iranian settings. Their results showed that mindfulness mediates the connection between reflective practice and teacher growth, suggesting that integrating mindfulness into EFL training programs could further enhance teachers' PD.

However, this focus on reflective practice is not unique to Iran. In effect, the broader second language teacher education literature has extensively explored both the theoretical and practical dimensions of reflection and its application across diverse teaching environments (e.g. Anani Sarab & Mardian, 2023; Hansen & Mendzheritskaya, 2024; Kamali & Javahery, 2024; Nguyen, 2023; Turhan & Kirkgöz, 2023). In one of the comprehensive studies on reflection in teacher education, Anani Sarab and Mardian (2023) recently reviewed 92 published papers on L2 teacher reflection revealing several key findings. For example, they concluded that current definitions of teacher reflection are generally broad and descriptive. They also found that most studies focus on reflection at descriptive and comparative levels, often neglecting to encourage reflective practice. In another recent study, Turhan and Kirkgöz (2023) in quest of finding the depth of critical reflection of student teachers in an observation program concluded that while some slight changes were observed in the participants' perspectives on language teaching over the observation period, they did not reach a high level of criticality in their reflections. They further argued that despite engaging in reflective practices, the teacher candidates struggled to deeply interrogate and critically analyze their experiences in the classroom.

To address these challenges in fostering more practical levels of reflection, a Community of Practice (henceforth CoP) offers a promising framework. A CoP is defined as 'a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 2002, p. 115). Wenger (1998) attributed three characteristics to CoP, namely engagement, imagination,

and alignment. Engagement involves active participation in community activities, where individuals learn from interactions and gain real-world experience (Lave & Wenger, 2002). For teachers in a CoP, engagement could involve collaboratively designing lesson plans, sharing classroom experiences, or reflecting on teaching practices in PD sessions. Imagination allows members to envision possibilities beyond current realities, fostering innovation and the development of collective identities (Lave & Wenger, 2002). Teachers using imagination might envision how new methodologies or technologies can enhance their teaching, or how evolving pedagogical theories can be integrated into their classrooms. Alignment ensures that individual actions and goals are coordinated towards shared objectives, aligning efforts with broader community goals and the institutional context (Lave & Wenger, 2002). In teaching contexts, alignment could manifest in ensuring that classroom practices are consistent with school policies, curriculum requirements, and educational standards. It might also involve aligning personal teaching philosophies with the collective goals of the school or CoP (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2014).

There has been a growing interest in applying CoP as a framework to evaluate various aspects of teacher education such as teacher reflection (Ng & Tan, 2009), teacher efficacy (Hawkman et al., 2019), and teacher leadership (Campbell et al., 2022), to name a few. This surge in CoP employment in modeling different aspects of teacher education emphasizes its suitability for this particular purpose. In the same vein, this study, adopting this framework, attempts to explore the impact of teachers' collaborative reflection on the depth and breadth of teachers' reflective skills by comparing reflective notes before and after collaborative reflection.

Against this background, this study is significant on two fronts. First, it contributes to the ongoing literature regarding reflection and collaborative reflection by examining it within an under-researched context of Iran. Despite existing scholarship, there remains a need for further exploration, particularly considering the highly context-specific nature of these practices (Mann & Walsh, 2013). This is particularly pertinent given the socio-economic factors at play, such as the lack of financial incentives for teachers to engage in reflective practices (Kamali, 2014). Second, by anchoring its investigation within the framework of CoP, the study offers a unique lens through which to examine reflection as a socially embedded and culturally influenced phenomenon. Hence, the research questions guiding this study are as follows:

- (1) Does Iranian teachers' collaborative reflection affect their reflection depth and breadth?
- (2) How does CoP explain this?

Method

Context and participants

This study was conducted within the context of English language schools in Iran, where PD for teachers is often characterized by workshops, seminars, or webinars by teacher trainers. Four collaborative reflection sessions were held to allow the participants to engage in sharing insights and experiences to enhance their teaching skills. For this

Table 1. Teachers' demographic information.

Teacher	Gender	Age	Education	Teaching experience
1	Male	23	BA TEFL	1
2	Female	27	BA Psychology	4
3	Female	26	MA TEFL	6
4	Male	25	BA TEFL	2
5	Female	20	TEFL student	2 months
6	Female	26	BA Translation Studies	3
7	Male	24	BA English Literature	2
8	Female	30	MA Management	5

study, the data were gathered from a sample of eight teachers who possessed diverse teaching experience.

We employed purposive sampling to select participants who possessed specific characteristics relevant to our research objectives, which are teaching experience (both novice and experienced) and educational background (EFL graduate and non-EFL graduate). The sample consisted of eight English language teachers from two different English language schools in Iran. This intentional selection process was crucial in capturing a wide range of perspectives on collaborative reflection and its impact on reflective practices. Moreover, the purposive sampling approach allowed us to focus on individuals who could provide rich insights into the dynamics of collaborative reflection within the context of English language teaching. While the sample size is small, the diversity in experiences and qualifications enhances the relevance of the findings, contributing meaningfully to the existing literature on PD and reflective practices in language education.

The chosen teachers had had a range of teaching experience from 2 months to 6 years. The participants had diverse educational backgrounds, including completed or ongoing studies in fields such as TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language), Translation Studies, and English Literature, ranging from undergraduate to master's (MA) levels (See Table 1).

To adhere to ethical guidelines, all eight participants provided their consent to participate in this study. To ensure confidentiality, participants were assured of the anonymity of their responses in both narrative inquiry and reflective notes. Furthermore, the principals of the language schools were briefed on the study's aims, and permission was granted for the research to be conducted.

Data collection

In a PD program for EFL teachers, we organized four collaborative reflection sessions to enhance awareness and understanding of 'teacher talk', which refers to the language a teacher uses in the classroom to provide input, guide, and interact with students, often adjusted to match their language proficiency (Jin & Webb, 2020) with all its constructive and obstructive features (see Walsh, 2002). Teachers independently watched a recorded lesson on YouTube before each session with each video showcasing a different teaching context and skill including Pre-intermediate reading, beginner vocabulary, upper-intermediate speaking, and elementary grammar, respectively. The primary focus of the observations, reflective notes, and discussions was teacher talk. Prior to that and to help participants gain a clearer understanding of this concept, they were assigned to watch

a webinar on Teacher Talk, run by the first researcher, on the TESOL International Association YouTube channel. In each session, the participants wrote reflective notes for 20 minutes, focusing on teacher talk, followed by a 30-minute group discussion to share insights and gain diverse perspectives. After the discussion, teachers wrote a second set of reflective notes for more practical reflections, integrating feedback from the group for an additional 20 minutes. The second researcher audio recorded the sessions to capture the details of the conversations and for a detailed analysis of the participants' reflections and interactions

To gain a comprehensive understanding of how collaborative reflection sessions influence teachers' engagement, alignment, and imagination within the CoP framework, a narrative inquiry methodology (Barkhuizen, 2016) was adopted. To do so, teachers completed a narrative frame including four sentences (such as 'During the reflection session, I realized that ...') in which they narrated some experiences regarding the reflection sessions. Data collection also involved semi-structured interviews after the collaborative reflection sessions and gathering reflective notes from the teachers following their participation in collaborative reflection sessions.

Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed based on the guidelines of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). We employed an iterative comparison method to generate codes by initially familiarizing ourselves with the data while considering CoP as the theoretical framework. Our focus was on how collaborative reflection sessions in the Iranian context impacted English teachers' reflective skills through engagement, alignment, and imagination. The data gathered from Farsi interviews were translated into English for coding and all the gathered data (reflective notes, narrative frames, and interviews) underwent thematic analysis. To categorize the data, we utilized a color-coding system, with specific colors representing different themes. We then constructed a codebook outlining axial relationships among CoP-related codes.

The researchers were aware of the impact of their positionality on the analysis of data. Consequently, they approached the interpretation of the data with care. Their substantial involvement with Iranian educators in various capacities – such as teachers, teacher trainers, and researchers – over the preceding years has equipped them with a deep comprehension of the context and the participants involved in the study. In addition, the second researcher who was responsible for data collection worked in the institutions from which the data were gathered.

Findings

Engagement

Analysis of the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews, and reflective and narrative inquiry notes revealed that identifying effective teaching strategies such as elicitation, body language, and scaffolded instructions were the main elements being focused on in pre-notes. However, demonstrating a more comprehensive engagement with the mentioned teaching strategies and recognizing their importance in facilitating

the learning process were the changes observed in post-notes. Comparing T6's pre and post-notes from the second collaborative reflection session revealed that before the group discussion, she was only able to recognize echoing, which is a component of increasing teacher talking time (TTT) (Walsh, 2002) and refers to the practice where a teacher repeats or rephrases what students say during classroom interactions, in the observed lesson. However, after the discussion, she realized the importance of reducing TTT and the effectiveness of the techniques, such as body language that can be used to help teachers reduce TTT.

Pre-Discussion: There is some echoing in his teaching that can be considered annoying by some students and increases TTT.

Post-Discussion: The more I observe classes focusing on the matter of Teacher Talk, the better I realize the importance of using this method. (T6, Reflective notes).

In the pre-discussion notes, T6 was engaged with the observed class by criticizing excessive echoing that may hinder effective learning, while the post-discussion notes show that T6 actively engaged with colleagues' feedback and reflected on her own performance to identify areas for improvement, such as using more body language and scaffolding (Tajeddin & Kamali, 2020) to enhance students' learning outcomes:

After the discussion, I came to conclusion that using more and more body language can help me in the classes, especially in beginner and elementary levels, and also asking students to follow you in using the body language. Effective body language can help teachers reduce unnecessary TTT. (T6, Reflective notes)

Additionally, analysis and comparisons made it clear that T1 was able to identify the teacher's strategy to avoid interrupting the students when they make an error but failed to realize the error correction techniques that had been employed. However, group discussion has helped him realize the note-taking method:

Pre-Discussion: He was patient enough to let the students complete their own turn and didn't interrupt them when they made an error. (T1, Reflective notes)

Post-Discussion: What I noticed was that the teacher wrote down the errors for the delayed error correction stage. (T1, Reflective notes)

In his narrative inquiry, T1 stated that discussing the observed lesson with his colleagues helped him learn practical teaching strategies:

One of the best things about the discussions was that I learned a lot from my coworkers. The more experienced fellow teachers were able to identify the strategies that I didn't know. I learned a lot after talking to them. (T1, Narrative inquiry)

Moreover, according to the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews, T1 stated that he could not realize the delayed error correction techniques without the help of his colleagues:

Researcher: I noticed in your narrative notes that you were unsure why the teacher didn't correct the students' errors during their conversations.

T1: Yes, that's right. I thought that the teacher doesn't intend to correct the students' errors at all. But after the discussion, I learned from the colleagues that the teacher was taking notes from the errors so he could give feedback at the end of the lesson. (T1, Interview)

Furthermore, five of the participants highlighted the active participation and learning that occurred through group discussions. They emphasized the importance of sharing experiences and perspectives which included a collaborative learning environment within the community:

What I noticed more after each discussion was that we can broaden our knowledge by sharing. I understood that sharing is a beneficial method of gaining knowledge especially for the novice ones. (T7, Narrative inquiry)

Sharing also creates an opportunity for the participants to engage actively which leads to challenging and revising their own perspectives:

One of the best things about the discussions was that I learned a lot from my coworkers. I learned that sometimes I had a wrong viewpoint about something and this made me look at the teachers' performances negatively. (T4, Narrative inquiry)

Regarding the mode of engagement, the collaborative reflection sessions had two major impacts on the participants. Firstly, these sessions facilitated the identification and understanding of effective teaching strategies among participants. Second, collaborative reflection sessions fostered a culture of shared learning which ultimately enhanced professional growth and classroom practice.

Imagination

Imagination mode encouraged the participants to think beyond current practices and foresee new ways of utilizing materials and strategies. According to the pre-notes, T2 reflects on the observed lessons and imagines how certain teaching techniques could be improved, such as avoiding drilling exercises and considering the pace and rate of speech when teaching beginners. However, post-discussion notes revealed that T2 imagined implementing those teaching techniques in her lessons, such as using gestures, matching exercises, and using images to reduce TTT and facilitate learning:

Pre-discussion: Some parts shouldn't have been done. For example, eliciting what we haven't taught is not good. Sometimes the pace of his talk was not suitable for the beginners . . . The teacher has had the target language pictures printed and showed them to the learners which helped him avoid over explaining because the pictures were clear enough.

Post-discussion: I think I should use more gestures in my classes. I shouldn't expect the students to know what I haven't taught yet. Also, I believe using a couple of images on papers to show different actions was a good idea because it prevents teachers from repeating themselves and explaining the target language a lot because the students can see many items at the same time. (T2, Reflective notes)

During the semi-structured interview, T2 mentioned that while observing each lesson, she constantly reflected on her own classes and students. She envisioned ways to enhance her lessons and improve her teaching performance.

When I was observing the classes, I always thought about my own lessons and students and imagined how to apply the strategies to improve my lessons. (T2, Interview)

In the pre-discussion notes, T1 imagined how to reduce TTT effectively in the classroom, such as using mimes to convey meaning without interrupting class concentration. Then,

in the post-discussion notes, he imagined implementing new strategies in his classes, such as avoiding helpful sentence completions, which involved the teacher supplying part of a sentence for students to complete, to promote better understanding through context and practice:

Pre-Discussion: TTT reduction is performed in a subtle way to avoid interrupting the students.

Post-Discussion: So, the point here that I'm intended to use in all of my classes from now on, is the avoidance of helpful sentence completion especially in beginner classes. (T1, Reflective notes)

Moreover, based on the interview data, T1 mentioned that he learned several new strategies to reduce his TTT, such as avoiding completing sentences for students. He expressed excitement about implementing these strategies in his lessons to enhance his teaching performance:

Researcher: In your reflective notes, you mentioned that you learned new strategies, such as avoiding helpful sentence completion to reduce your TTT, is that correct?

T1: Yes, during the lesson observation, I noticed that some students had trouble finishing their sentences when they were talking. I wondered why the teacher didn't help them complete their sentences. During the discussion, I asked my colleagues if they knew the reason, and they explained that the teacher wanted the students to finish their own sentences. This strategy (avoiding helpful sentence completion) was new to me. (T1, Interview)

In the T8's post-discussion reflection, the teacher imagined implementing new teaching techniques, such as reducing dependence on course books and encouraging student participation through open-ended questions, demonstrating imagination in exploring alternative approaches to teaching:

One thing that I learned from the observed class is that as a teacher, I should always strive to create a comfortable and safe learning environment for my students. This will encourage them to participate more actively in the classroom and ultimately improve their learning outcomes. To implement these lessons in my classes, I will first reduce the amount of dependence on course books and utilize more open-ended questions, asking broad questions, to encourage student participation and engagement. (T8, Reflective notes)

T8 also imagines that applying the gained insights in her lesson will enhance the learning experience of the students:

Overall, this observation has provided me with valuable insights as an educator, and I am looking forward to implementing these lessons in order to enhance the learning experience for my students. (T8, Narrative inquiry)

Comparing pre and post-notes of T3 helped us realize that the teacher imagined alternative techniques for class management and vocabulary presentation and she also imagined implementing new strategies for managing crowded classes in the future:

Pre-Discussion: One thing that I found interesting about this lesson was that the teacher presented the new vocabulary through the students' L1. (first language)

Post-Discussion: One thing I want to use in my crowded school classes (in the future) is to consider L1 as a method of presenting new vocabulary to the students. (T3, Reflective notes)

During the interview, T2 also stated that he did not know that he could use L1 to present the new vocabulary. However, after the discussion, he realized that using L1 is one of the methods of presenting new vocabulary to students. Therefore, he imagined implementing this method of presentation in his large classes to save time and increase the efficiency of the vocabulary lessons.

Researcher: After reading your notes, I noticed that you did not know that presenting new vocabulary through the L1 of the students is considered an acceptable method, right?

T3: I always thought that I wasn't allowed to speak Persian (L1) in my lessons so when a student asked me the meaning of a word, I did my best to define it in English so I wasn't able to manage my time properly. After the discussion, I realized that sometimes, it's ok to use L1 to present the difficult words to students. I was so happy about it and couldn't wait to apply this technique in my lessons to save time. (T3, Interview)

From reimagining teaching techniques to fostering more interactive and engaging classrooms, exploring the imagination mode revealed a dynamic spectrum of envisioned improvements and innovative practices among the participants. Not only the participants sought to address the current challenges in their lessons, but envisioned a future where their lessons are more effective and interactive.

Alignment

The data, narrative inquiry, interviews, and reflective notes, reflect a strong sense of alignment among the participants toward shared goals and values. T5's willingness to participate in a similar PD program indicates that this collaborative reflection program has been able to create a collective commitment to continuous learning and PD:

I found the program pretty useful. I haven't experienced such PD program before and it helped me appreciate sharing experience and knowledge. I'm looking forward to participating more programs like this. (T5, Narrative inquiry)

In addition to T5, T7 also mentioned that PD sessions and workshops like the recent collaborative reflection sessions are necessary to improve their teaching knowledge and practice:

At first, I didn't think much of this PD program. But little by little I realized how it can be effective in my teaching. I can feel the improvement in my knowledge and teaching techniques. I hope we'll have more programs like this in the future. (T7, Narrative inquiry)

Furthermore, it was acknowledged by six of the participants that this experience was enriching and helped them improve their reflective skills which were aligned with the institute's objectives of fostering a supportive and collaborative learning environment:

This program was an enriching one. We got to improve our reflecting skills and benefit from several viewpoints which helped us have more effective lessons as we are always expected. (T3, Narrative inquiry)

T7 also stated that:

The collaborative reflection sessions not only were beneficial for the participants, but also will be so advantageous for the school too. Teachers will teach better and this will lead to better language outcome for the students. (T7, Narrative inquiry)

The data also suggest that participants are united in their commitment to enhance their practices and benefit from diverse viewpoints and experiences shared within the community, helping them align their reflections with broader teaching principles. Comparing pre- and post-reflective notes of T2 revealed that in the pre-discussion note, the teacher identified inconsistencies between observed teaching practice and effective teaching principles, such as the need for a more balanced strategy to maintain both discipline and engagement. In the post-discussion notes, the teacher aligned her reflections with broader teaching principles, such as using more effective body language to reduce TTT and enhance students' learning outcomes.

Pre-discussion: Moreover, while discipline is important in the classroom, it should not come at the expense of student enjoyment and engagement. I observed that the teacher used body language and facial expressions to make the class more interesting and engaging, which may help reduce the need for excessive teacher talk and encourage interaction among students.

Post-discussion: Additionally, I think that my body language is not effective enough. So, I will work on my body language and facial expressions to improve the quality of my teaching performance and encourage my students to have more interaction in the lesson. I'm sure that this will help me control my TTT. (T2, Reflective notes)

Moreover, according to the data gathered from the interview:

This PD program helped me improve my teaching style by observing several lessons and learning from more experienced colleagues. One of the things that I realized about my teaching style was that I didn't take body language so seriously because I didn't know how effective it could be. But now I've been trying to improve my body language and make the class atmosphere more interesting and interactive. (T2, Interview)

T1 aligned her reflections with effective teaching principles, such as promoting student engagement and understanding through elicitation in the pre-discussion notes then she aligned her reflection with broader teaching principles, such as adopting a student-centered approach, understanding individual learning styles, and fostering classroom community in the post-discussion notes:

Post-discussion: appropriate instruction checking questions will help ensure that they are following the lesson, which is crucial for keeping them engaged and invested in learning. I understood that I need to observe the students in order to understand their individual learning styles as it will enable me to help them more efficiently. Finally, by encouraging students to communicate with each other through classroom language which was introduced to them, they can practice their language skills more effectively and will also build a sense of community in the classroom. (T1, Reflective notes)

Additionally, according to the data gathered from the interview, T1 stated that how the collaborative reflection program helped her align her teaching style with more effective teaching principles:

This program helped me improve my teaching style in three areas. First, although I knew about the benefits of being aware of the students' learning styles, I never tried to get help from it but during this program, I was convinced that it's so helpful to know the students' learning styles. Second, I always heard that asking the students to check their answers in pairs or groups, but I didn't know the reason so I didn't use to take it seriously. But when my coworkers told me about the scientific reasons behind it, I decided to include more pair checks in my lessons. Finally, I always thought that asking ICQs (instruction checking

questions) were a waste of time until I heard about its effectiveness in communicating with students. (T1, Interview)

According to the data, it is evident that the collaborative reflection program has fostered a strong sense of alignment toward shared goals and values which encompasses a culture of continuous learning and improvement, which is beyond individual growth and has the potential benefits for the institute and student outcome. Moreover, the program has effectively guided the participants in aligning their reflections with broader teaching practices.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that teachers showed improvement in their reflective skills in three levels of CoP: engagement, imagination, and alignment and that the participating teachers' reflections improved in their post-reflective notes, becoming more practical and diverse through group discussions. While the findings corroborate previous research, concluding that collaboration can enhance teachers' reflection skills (Kamali & Javahery, 2024), the result of this study contradicts those of Turhan and Kirkgöz (2023) who concluded that their 'participants could not reach a high level of criticality in their reflections' (p. 222) after attending collaborative reflection sessions. Despite this contradictory finding, Turhan and Kirkgöz's (2023) study posited that 'teacher candidates need more encouragement, feedback and training related to how to be critical reflective practitioners' (p. 236) which aligns with the findings of the present study.

In a systematic review of 92 published papers about reflection and teacher reflective practices, Anani Sarab and Mardian (2023) determined that most of these analyzed studies 'portray reflection at descriptive and comparative levels, failing to encourage teachers at the critical level' (p. 768). Considering this warning, this study could add to the body of literature by proposing that collaborative reflection can increase the criticality of language teachers' reflective skills.

In line with the rich literature on CoP as a framework within which collaboration and reflection can be analyzed (Ng & Tan, 2009; Trabona et al., 2019), this study reiterates its relevance within contexts where societal dynamics and interactive processes are significant specifically when it comes to the teacher education and teacher PD milieu. By fostering a collaborative environment, CoP facilitates the sharing of experiences and strategies among teachers, thereby enhancing reflective practices and promoting professional growth. This study further highlighted how CoP could bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, enabling teachers to critically engage with their practices and continually adapt to the evolving educational context. The findings suggested that implementing CoP in teacher education programs could lead to more profound and sustained improvements in teaching reflection skills.

In the engagement level of Wenger's (1998) realization of CoP, the results of this study suggested that the teachers were able to identify effective teaching strategies more accurately and appreciate the culture of shared learning after the collaborative reflection. This supports Nguyen's (2023) findings on the impact of peer observation of teaching in fostering collegiality and collaboration. In line with Nguyen's findings,

which revealed that collaboration fosters collegiality among peers and fosters reflection, this study found that the culture of shared learning was promoted after collaborative reflection.

In the second level which is imagination, teachers discussed how they imagined using these techniques in their own classrooms. This finding closely corresponds to the observations made by Veenman et al. (2002), who asserted that most of the pre-service teachers in their study which reported on a cooperative learning course for student teachers expressed 'a readiness to use cooperative learning methods in their future lessons' (p. 87). This is also supported in the literature regarding in-service teachers. For example, Miquel and Duran (2017) argued that peer learning networks could help the participating teachers by allowing them to transfer the knowledge into other content areas, such as their own classrooms.

In the third level of the CoP model adopted as a theoretical underpinning of this study – alignment – we found that teachers could establish a culture of continuous learning and align the reflections with tacit, complex, and implicit teaching techniques. Consistent with various prior research, which has indicated that involving students in evaluating and offering feedback on their peers' work can improve critical thinking skills (e.g. Fang et al., 2021), our investigation revealed a similar benefit for teachers, who, in a different context, are also learners themselves.

All in all, this study has contributed to the existing literature on the enhancement of language teachers' reflective skills within the framework of CoP. Through collaborative reflection, teachers demonstrated improvements across three dimensions of engagement, imagination, and alignment. The deepening and diversification of reflective practices observed among participants align with existing literature emphasizing the positive impact of collaboration on teachers' reflective abilities. Moreover, our findings challenge previous conclusions regarding the limitations of collaborative reflection, suggesting instead that with appropriate support and training, teachers can develop in-depth reflective skills through collaborative processes.

Conclusions and implications

This study examined the impact of collaborative reflection on teachers' reflective skills in two Iranian language schools within three levels of the CoP model. The findings revealed significant enhancement in the breadth and depth of teachers' reflections in the three components of the CoP framework: engagement, imagination, and alignment. The study highlights the efficacy of collaborative reflection in PD programs for language teachers. The enhanced reflective skills observed suggest that collaborative environments can foster more practical critical thinking and continuous development among teachers. Implementing such reflective practices in teacher education programs could lead to more profound and sustained improvements in teaching reflection skills, ultimately benefiting the educational process and outcomes.

Despite the study's contributions, the specific context of Iranian language schools and reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to bias, are two important limitations of the study. Future research could address these limitations by including more diverse samples and incorporating objective measures of reflection.

Disclosure statement

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

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