

Understanding Reflective Practice in Education: A Qualitative Systematic Review of In-Service Teachers' Experiences

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Abstract: This qualitative systematic review explores how in-service teachers engage with reflective practice across diverse educational settings. Drawing on peer-reviewed qualitative studies published between January 2021 and June 2026 and following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, the review employed thematic synthesis to generate three overarching themes: (1) forms and levels of reflective practice, (2) teachers' perceptions and lived experiences of reflection, and (3) reflective practice as a driver of professional development and identity. The findings reveal that while most teachers have a conceptual understanding of reflective practice, critical and systematic reflection remains underutilized. Collaborative structures, institutional support, and appropriately scaffolded digital tools significantly mediate reflection depth. The review identifies a persistent gap between surface-level, descriptive reflection and the deeper, critical form that drives genuine professional growth. Practical implications are drawn for teachers, teacher educators, institutional leaders, and policy makers. EFL and non-EFL contexts are represented across the included studies, allowing cross-contextual comparison. The review also identifies key gaps, including the scarcity of longitudinal studies and the underrepresentation of certain geographic contexts.

Keywords: Reflective Practice - Teacher Professional Development - Qualitative Systematic Review

فهم الممارسة التأملية في التعليم: مراجعة منهجية نوعية لتجارب المعلمين أثناء الخدمة

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مستخلص البحث: تهدف هذه المراجعة المنهجية النوعية إلى استكشاف كيفية انخراط المعلمين أثناء الخدمة في الممارسات التأملية ضمن سياقات تعليمية متنوعة. واستناداً إلى دراسات نوعية محكمة نُشرت خلال الفترة الممتدة من يناير 2021 إلى يونيو 2026، ووفقاً لإرشادات PRISMA 2020 اعتمدت المراجعة أسلوب التوليف الموضوعي (Thematic Synthesis) بهدف استخلاص ثلاثة محاور رئيسية شاملة، وهي: (1) أشكال ومستويات الممارسات التأملية، (2) تصورات المعلمين وتجاربهم مع التأمل، و(3) الممارسات التأملية بوصفها عاملاً دافعاً للتطوير المهني وتشكل الهوية المهنية. وتشير النتائج إلى أنه على الرغم من امتلاك معظم المعلمين إدراكاً مفاهيمياً للممارسات التأملية، إلا أن ممارسة التأمل النقدي والمنهجي لا تزال غير مستثمرة بالشكل الكافي. كما أن الهياكل التعاونية، والدعم المؤسسي، والأدوات الرقمية المهيكلية بشكل ملائم تسهم بشكل ملحوظ في تعميق مستوى التأمل. وتكشف المراجعة عن وجود فجوة مستمرة بين مستويات التأمل الوصفي السطحي وبين التأمل النقدي العميق الذي يقود إلى نمو مهني حقيقي. وتُستخلص من الدراسة مجموعة من الدلالات التطبيقية الموجهة للمعلمين، ومُدرّبي المعلمين، وقادة المؤسسات التعليمية، وصُنّاع السياسات. كما شملت الدراسات المُضمنة سياقات تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) وسياقات تعليمية غير متخصصة، بما يتيح إجراء مقارنات عبر سياقات مختلفة. وتُبرز المراجعة كذلك عدداً من الفجوات البحثية، من أبرزها ندرة الدراسات الطويلة وضعف تمثيل بعض السياقات الجغرافية.

الكلمات مفتاحية: الممارسات التأملية، التطوير المهني للمعلمين، مراجعة منهجية نوعية.



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1. Introduction

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite growing scholarly interest in reflective practice, a significant gap persists between its theoretical endorsement and its systematic implementation in teachers' professional lives. Few qualitative syntheses have examined how teachers across diverse contexts actually engage with reflective practice, or what conditions enable critical reflection rather than routine compliance. This review addresses that gap by synthesizing qualitative evidence from 50 studies (2021-2026) to generate transferable insights for to inform and improve teacher education, institutional policy, and future research. Pertinent questions are posed: What forms of reflective practice do teachers use, and how do these practices vary across different contexts? How do teachers perceive and experience reflective practice in their professional lives? What role does reflective practice play in teachers' professional development and identity formation?

This review addresses these questions through systematic qualitative analysis, contributing to a substantial, if still incomplete, synthesized body of evidence. The review is grounded in Schön's (1983) distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, and Gibbs's (1988) reflective cycle.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This review was conducted following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines and using thematic synthesis as the analytical framework (Appendix A; Table A1). It is important to note that thematic synthesis was specifically designed to capture the findings of qualitative studies, enabling the creation of higher-order interpretive themes that extend beyond the findings of individual studies. Furthermore, this approach aligns with the goal of understanding teachers' personal experiences of reflective practice. Qualitative synthesis was also chosen because the research questions focused on teachers' personal experiences, perceptions, and context-specific meaning.

2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Qualitative or qualitative-dominant mixed methods designs with sufficient qualitative data for synthesis	Quantitative designs without qualitative data (excluded to maintain methodological coherence with the qualitative synthesis approach)
In-service teachers in K-12 or higher education settings	Focused exclusively on student rather than teacher reflection (excluded because this review focuses on teacher, not student, reflective processes)
Reflective practice as a central focus rather than a secondary variable	Conference papers, dissertations, or book chapters
Published in peer-reviewed journals between 2021 and 2026	Clinical rather than educational professional contexts
Written in English	Lacked sufficient methodological transparency for quality assessment

Book chapters, dissertations, and conference papers were excluded because they lacked a peer-review process and methodological transparency. This is necessary for evaluation under The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP).

2.3 Search Strategy and Database Selection

A database search was conducted, and Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Education Source, and PsycINFO were selected to provide the most comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed education research internationally that meets the inclusion criteria for the review (Table 2). Searches were conducted across three fields: Title, Abstract, and Keywords. The complete Boolean search string, search parameters, language criteria, document type filters, and deduplication procedure are documented in Appendix B.

Table 2. Boolean Search String

"Reflective Practice" AND "Teachers"
"Reflective Teaching" OR "Teacher Reflection"
"Professional Development" AND "Reflection" AND "Teachers"
Qualitative" AND "Reflective Practice" AND "In-service" "Teachers"

The search date range was limited to results from January 2021 to June 2026. This range included only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English. The combined database search yielded 874 records, and after duplicate removal, 688 records remained for selection. Deduplication was performed using the reference management function in each database platform, supplemented by manual cross-checking of the databases to ensure the absence of duplicate records. The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist was then used to evaluate the included studies. This checklist evaluates 10 criteria, including clarity of study purpose and robust results.

2.5 Thematic Synthesis

Following Thomas and Harden's (2008) three-step procedure

Table 3. Stages of Thematic Synthesis

Analysis Phase	Details
Initial Coding	Findings and discussion sections of each included study were read line-by-line, and free codes were assigned to capture the meaning of each unit of data without imposing prior interpretive categories
Descriptive Themes	Related codes were grouped into descriptive themes that preserved the language and conceptual framing of the primary studies, ensuring that the initial synthesis remained grounded in the original data before interpretive abstraction
Analytical Themes	Descriptive themes were further interpreted and synthesized into analytical themes that represent higher-order conceptual insights, integrating patterns across multiple studies and extending beyond the findings of any individual source
Inter-rater Reliability	Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa coefficient, which yielded a value of 0.81, indicating substantial agreement between coders and supporting the consistency of the coding process
Disagreement Resolution	All coding disagreements were reviewed and resolved through structured discussion sessions among the research team, ensuring that final code assignments reflected consensus judgement rather than individual interpretation. To minimize interpretive bias, the research team maintained a reflexivity log throughout the coding process, in which analysts documented their prior assumptions and theoretical orientations. This audit trail was reviewed at each stage of the synthesis to ensure that emerging themes were grounded in the primary data rather than shaped by pre-existing expectations. Member-checking procedures were not applicable given the secondary nature of this synthesis; however, peer debriefing between team members served as the primary mechanism for identifying and managing potential sources of bias

Based on this analysis, each study was assessed by two independent reviewers, and any disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. In some cases, consensus was not reached, requiring the involvement of a third reviewer. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using a kappa coefficient (0.81) which indicated a high degree of agreement between reviewers (Landis & Koch, 1977). All studies received a score of 7 to 10, indicating methodological adequacy for synthesis.

2.4 Data Extraction

All data were extracted into a matrix containing all metadata for filtering studies. Two reviewers independently processed the data, and any disagreements were resolved through discussion. Finally, the data processing matrix was comprehensively analyzed before the analytical stage to identify patterns.

3. Results

This section outlines the synthesized findings of the review. Table 4 presents the characteristics of all included studies. Table 5 maps the themes identified in each study.

Table 4. Characteristics of Included Studies

Author(s) / Year	Country	Educational Context	Participants	Research Design	Reflective Practice Focus	CASP	Sample Size	Data Collection Tool	Analysis Method	Key Findings
Urzúa & Asención-Delaney (2023)	USA	Higher education (language teacher education)	Novice language teachers	Qualitative (community of practice)	Online reflective communities; written reflections	8	20 novice language teachers	Journals; forums; interviews	Thematic analysis	Communities of practice deepened reflective engagement; peer accountability strengthened
Alt et al. (2021)	Israel	Higher education	University students/ teachers	Mixed methods (exploratory sequential)	Reflective journaling; lifelong learning	8	N/A (survey)	Questionnaires; journal tasks	Exploratory sequential mixed methods	Journaling linked to lifelong learning; institutional context shapes depth
Silva (2025)	USA	Higher/ teacher education	Monolingual & multilingual teacher candidates	Qualitative (critical language events analysis)	Critical reflection; language identity	7	12 teacher candidates	Language event narratives; interviews	Critical discourse analysis	Monolingual teachers: surface reflection; multilingual candidates: deeper identity reflection
Arefian et al. (2026)	Iran	EFL teacher education	EFL teachers	Qualitative (community of practice)	ChatGPT-driven collaborative reflective practice	8	14 EFL teachers	ChatGPT prompts; journals; interviews	Thematic analysis	ChatGPT-aided reflection enhanced professional dialogue and critical thinking
Bachore et al. (2024)	Ethiopia	Secondary school	Secondary school teachers	Mixed methods	Awareness & practice of reflective approach	7	132 teachers (survey + 8 interviews)	Questionnaires; interviews	Descriptive statistics; thematic analysis	Low RP awareness; workload and lack of training primary barriers
Burhan-Horasanli & Hart (2024)	Canada/Turkey	Teacher education / CPD	In-service teachers	Qualitative (conceptual/ empirical)	Reflection-for-action; collaborative transformation	8	8 in-service teachers	Reflective discussions; interviews	Interpretive qualitative analysis	Collaborative reflection-for-action enabled transformative learning across cultural dyads
Chen & Chen (2022)	China	K-12 / higher education	Teachers (mixed levels)	Mixed methods	Key factors influencing reflective practice skills	8	286 teachers + interview sub-sample	Questionnaires; interviews	Structural equation modelling; thematic analysis	Emotional regulation and professional identity mediated reflective practice quality
Tovey & Skolits (2021)	USA	Professional evaluation practice	Experienced evaluators	Qualitative (pheno-menological)	Conceptualizing and engaging in reflective practice	7	12 experienced evaluators	Pheno-menological interviews	Interpretive pheno-menological analysis (IPA)	Reflection iterative and context-dependent; experience shaped depth
Cirocki & Indrathne (2024)	Ecuador	EFL teacher CPD	In-service EFL teachers	Qualitative (case study / action research)	Effectiveness of reflection-based professional development	9	6 in-service EFL teachers	Observations; journals; interviews	Thematic analysis (case study)	Reflection-based CPD improved lesson planning; peer feedback a key enabler

Author(s) / Year	Country	Educational Context	Participants	Research Design	Reflective Practice Focus	CASP	Sample Size	Data Collection Tool	Analysis Method	Key Findings
Cole et al. (2022)	UK	Higher education	Teacher educators	Qualitative (reflective narrative)	Critical reflection on professional development	8	6 teacher educators	Narrative writing; group discussions	Narrative thematic analysis	Critical reflection on power dynamics repositioned professional identity
Körkkö et al. (2024)	Finland	Teacher education	Pre- and in-service teachers	Qualitative (narrative inquiry)	Sense of inadequacy; teacher identity under uncertainty	7	12 pre- and in-service teachers	Narrative accounts; interviews; journals	Narrative inquiry	Inadequacy triggered deeper reflection; uncertainty functioned as growth catalyst
DeLuca et al. (2023)	Australia / Bhutan / Canada	Teacher education programs	Teacher education students/ faculty	Qualitative (critical pedagogy)	Power, self-assessment, and critical reflection	8	18 teacher education students/ faculty	Pedagogy workshops; reflections; focus groups	Critical discourse analysis	Power asymmetries limited authentic reflection; student voice undervalued
Patel (2021)	Canada	Higher education classroom	Higher education students/ instructors	Qualitative (interpretive)	Discipline and professional attributes through reflection	7	24 higher education students/ instructors	Reflective assignments; interviews	Interpretive qualitative analysis	Reflection facilitated discipline-specific attribute development
Erbilgin & Robinson (2025)	USA	Lesson study / CPD	In-service teachers	Qualitative (reflective account)	Lesson study as reflective professional learning	8	4 in-service teachers (2 lesson study groups)	Lesson study cycles; accounts; interviews	Thematic analysis	Lesson study structured reflection; collaborative inquiry improved responsiveness
Fathi et al. (2024)	Iran	EFL higher education	EFL learners and teachers	Quantitative/ experimental	Reflective teaching and pragmatic competence	8	102 EFL learners + teachers	Pre-/post-tests; questionnaires	ANCOVA; descriptive statistics	Reflective teaching improved EFL learners' pragmatic competence
Gebremariam & Sisay (2024)	Ethiopia	Higher education	University teachers	Qualitative (phenomenological)	Reflective experiences and challenges in public universities	7	10 university teachers	Interviews; reflective journals	Interpretive phenomenological analysis	Institutional demands hindered deep reflection; peer dialogue a mitigating enabler
Gudeta (2022)	Ethiopia	Secondary school (EFL)	In-service EFL teachers	Qualitative (case study)	Professional development through reflective practice	8	8 in-service EFL teachers	Observations; interviews; journals	Qualitative case study analysis	Sustained reflection improved lesson planning and pedagogical decision-making
Haile et al. (2024)	Ethiopia	EFL higher education	EFL instructors	Mixed methods	Questioning behaviors for reflective learning facilitation	8	45 EFL instructors	Questionnaires; observations; interviews	Mixed methods (thematic + statistical)	Higher-order questioning linked to stronger reflective facilitation and learner engagement
Holden (2023)	UK	Online lesson study	In-service teachers	Qualitative (case study)	Collaborative professional learning via online lesson study	8	4 in-service teachers	Online lesson study; reflections; interviews	Case study thematic analysis	Online lesson study sustained reflective collaboration across distributed contexts

Author(s) / Year	Country	Educational Context	Participants	Research Design	Reflective Practice Focus	CASP	Sample Size	Data Collection Tool	Analysis Method	Key Findings
Hosseinnia et al. (2025)	Iran	EFL / CPD	EFL teachers	Qualitative (lesson study)	Lesson study in EFL teacher professional development	8	6 EFL teachers	Lesson study cycles; discussions; interviews	Qualitative thematic analysis	Lesson study promoted systematic EFL reflection and collegial learning culture
Hummes & Seckel (2024)	Brazil/Chile	Teacher training / lesson study	In-service teachers	Mixed methods (lesson study)	Lesson study and didactic suitability criteria	9	6 in-service teachers (3 lesson study groups)	Lesson study; didactic assessments; interviews	Mixed methods content analysis	Lesson study improved didactic suitability awareness and structured dialogue
Hyde (2024)	UK	Classroom research	In-service teachers	Qualitative (phenomenological)	Teacher reflection as a research method	8	1 in-service teacher (researcher-participant)	Phenomenological diary; field notes	Interpretive phenomenological analysis	Reflection-as-research surfaced tacit knowledge; self-study revealed institutional constraints
Kaloudis et al. (2025)	Greece	Physical education / CPD	Physical education teachers	Qualitative (action research)	Reflective thinking; Paralympic values; inclusive practices	8	8 physical education teachers	Action research cycles; journals; observations	Thematic analysis (action research)	Structured reflection on Paralympic values changed inclusive practice and beliefs
Suphasri (2021)	Thailand	Teacher education / EFL	Teachers and teacher educators	Qualitative (theoretical/empirical review)	Issues, challenges, and considerations in reflective practice	7	N/A (conceptual review)	Literature review; theoretical frameworks	Critical theoretical synthesis	Key challenges: definitional ambiguity and surface compliance with reflective mandates
Kolajo (2025)	Nigeria	CPD / school-based	In-service teachers	Qualitative (practitioner inquiry)	Pedagogical excellence through reflective teaching	8	10 in-service teachers	Practitioner inquiry journals; peer discussions	Qualitative content analysis	Practitioner inquiry deepened reflective habits and classroom responsiveness
Afrilyasanti et al. (2025)	Indonesia	In-service teacher training	In-service teachers	Qualitative (design-based research)	Feedback literacy; self-regulated learning; professional growth	8	12 in-service teachers	DBR workshops; journals; peer feedback	Reflexive thematic analysis	Feedback literacy integrated with RP improved self-regulated professional learning
Lefebvre et al. (2022)	Canada	Initial teacher education	Novice teachers	Qualitative (reflective practice)	Novice teachers' reflections on teaching practice	8	6 novice teachers	Journals; interviews; focus groups	Thematic analysis	Novice reflection clustered around management; peer dialogue accelerated depth
Lefebvre et al. (2023)	Canada	Teacher education / classroom	Teachers and students	Qualitative (case study)	Reflection on teaching action and student learning	8	4 teachers + student data	Observations; teacher journals; student assessments	Qualitative case study analysis	Reflection on student outcomes produced more differentiated instructional adjustments

Author(s) / Year	Country	Educational Context	Participants	Research Design	Reflective Practice Focus	CASP	Sample Size	Data Collection Tool	Analysis Method	Key Findings
Lepp et al. (2023)	Estonia	Initial teacher education	Teacher education students	Mixed methods	Video recording and analysis of teaching	8	24 teacher education students	Video recordings; self-assessment rubrics; journals	Mixed methods (qualitative coding + descriptive stats)	Video-supported reflection increased self-assessment accuracy; surfaced teaching blind spots
Leibur & Saks (2023)	Estonia	Higher education / CPD	In-service teachers	Mixed methods (learning analytics)	Learning analytics to support professional development	8	18 in-service teachers	Analytics dashboards; reflective surveys; interviews	Mixed methods (statistical + thematic)	Learning analytics anchored and deepened reflective practice conversations
Lim et al. (2022)	Singapore	Public health higher education	Higher education teachers	Systematic review + meta-analysis	Outcomes, facilitators, and barriers to deep self-reflection	9	N/A (systematic review, 22 studies)	Systematic review; PRISMA protocol	Meta-analytic synthesis	Deep reflection facilitated by safety, dialogue, and feedback; time was primary barrier
Lim et al. (2023)	Singapore	Public health higher education	Higher education teachers	Mixed methods	Perceptions, facilitators, and barriers to self-reflection	8	32 higher education teachers	Questionnaires; focus groups; reflective diaries	Mixed methods (thematic + descriptive)	Positive perceptions but inconsistent practice; institutional facilitation improved regularity
Machost & Stains (2023)	USA	STEM higher education	Instructors / educators	Qualitative (primer/ review)	Reflective practice: a primer for practitioners	7	N/A (conceptual primer)	Theoretical literature review	Narrative/ descriptive synthesis	Five dimensions of RP identified; tiered model proposed for STEM practitioners
Maharjan et al. (2024)	Nepal	School-based / CPD	In-service teachers	Qualitative (narrative inquiry)	Reflective practice, self-efficacy, emancipation, empowerment	8	12 in-service teachers	Narrative journals; in-depth interviews	Narrative inquiry (thematic coding)	Sustained RP produced gains in self-efficacy, emancipation, and teacher agency
Mohamed et al. (2022)	Malaysia	Higher education	Teachers / teacher educators	Qualitative (conceptual)	Complexity of reflective practice	8	N/A (conceptual)	Theoretical synthesis; literature review	Conceptual thematic analysis	RP conceptualised as multi-layered, shaped by individual, social, and institutional forces
Novoa-Echaurren et al. (2025)	Chile	University / CPD	University teachers	Qualitative	Digital technology use and transformative teaching	8	8 university teachers	Journals; interviews; observations	Qualitative thematic analysis	Digital tools lowered reflection barriers; technology-mediated RP supported practice change
Philp-Clark & Grieshaber (2023)	Australia	Early childhood education	Early childhood teachers	Systematic review	Critical reflection: what quality research reveals	9	N/A (systematic review, 42 studies)	Systematic literature review; quality appraisal	Systematic narrative synthesis	Quality RP research requires scaffolding, peer collaboration, and institutional support

Author(s) / Year	Country	Educational Context	Participants	Research Design	Reflective Practice Focus	CASP	Sample Size	Data Collection Tool	Analysis Method	Key Findings
Pinnegar & Lay (2023)	USA	Teacher education	Teacher educators	Qualitative (editorial/conceptual)	Role of reflection in teacher and educator development	7	N/A (editorial)	Theoretical synthesis; editorial commentary	Conceptual analysis	RP requires intentional scaffolding and contextual sensitivity to be transformative
Desmet & Roberts (2022)	USA	Service learning / teacher ed.	In-service teachers	Qualitative (design-based)	Transformational creativity and reflective learning	8	14 in-service teachers	DBR workshops; journals; interviews	Qualitative design-based research analysis	Service learning with structured reflection generated transformational creativity
Rushton et al. (2023)	UK	Teacher education	In-service teachers	Systematic review	Teacher identity in teachers' professional lives	9	N/A (systematic review, 38 studies)	Systematic review; thematic synthesis	Systematic narrative synthesis	Teacher identity constructed through sustained RP and peer dialogue
Saeidi et al. (2024)	Iran	EFL / CPD	EFL teachers	Mixed methods	CPD strategies and teacher success	7	102 EFL teachers (survey) + 9 interviews	ELTRI scale; TSES scale; interviews	Structural equation modelling; thematic analysis	CPD aligned with RP improved professional identity and self-efficacy in EFL contexts
Camus et al. (2023)	Hong Kong	Service learning / higher education	Higher education teachers	Qualitative (mixed disciplinary)	Disciplinary differences in reflective practice	8	18 higher education teachers (across 3 disciplines)	Focus groups; RP records; interviews	Comparative qualitative analysis	Disciplinary culture shaped reflection depth; science teachers: technical; humanities: critical
Sudirman et al. (2024)	Indonesia	Higher education	Higher education teachers	Systematic review	Reflective writing in higher education	9	N/A (systematic review, 38 studies)	Systematic review; PRISMA protocol	Systematic narrative synthesis	Reflective writing improved metacognition, professional identity, and critical engagement
Taddese & Rao (2022)	Ethiopia	Primary school	Primary school teachers	Qualitative (case study)	School-based collaborative reflection for professional learning	8	8 primary school teachers	Collaborative discussions; interviews; observations	Qualitative case study (thematic)	School-based collaborative reflection fostered professional learning and lesson quality
Tight (2023)	UK	Higher education (all sectors)	Academics / practitioners	Qualitative (critical review)	Reflection as a pervasive trend: assessment and critique	8	N/A (critical review)	Critical literature review	Evaluative conceptual synthesis	Reflection a performative norm; critical engagement requires structural reform

Author(s) / Year	Country	Educational Context	Participants	Research Design	Reflective Practice Focus	CASP	Sample Size	Data Collection Tool	Analysis Method	Key Findings
Tobin et al. (2025)	Ireland	CPD / school-based	In-service teachers	Qualitative (action research)	Collaborative reflective practice and impact on teaching	8	6 in-service teachers	Action research cycles; journals; interviews	Action research thematic analysis	Collaborative RP improved teaching confidence, responsiveness, and collegial culture
Weisi & Salari (2024)	Iran	EFL / CPD	EFL teachers	Quantitative/ correlational	Reflective practice, mindfulness, and professional development	8	202 EFL teachers	ELTRI; TSES; mindfulness scales	Structural equation modelling	Teacher mindfulness mediated RP-professional development relationship
Zohrabi & Xodabande (2024)	Iran	EFL teacher education	EFL teachers	Qualitative (comparative)	Individual vs. peer reflection in EFL teacher education	8	16 EFL teachers (8 individual, 8 peer reflection)	Reflective journals; peer discussions; interviews	Comparative thematic analysis	Peer reflection produced deeper critical engagement than individual reflection alone
Abbaspour et al. (2024)	Iran	School administration / CPD (centralized system)	Principals and teachers	Qualitative (exploratory)	Role of principals in enhancing teacher professional learning	8	22 principals and 38 teachers	Interviews; focus groups; document analysis	Qualitative exploratory thematic analysis	Principal instructional leadership was a key enabler of teacher RP and learning culture
Yagata (2025)	Japan	EFL / CPD	In-service EFL teachers	Qualitative (content analysis)	Peer reflective journals; socio-cultural influences on comment writing	8	8 in-service EFL teachers	Peer journals; written comments; interviews	Qualitative content analysis	Sociocultural norms shaped peer feedback; Japanese EFL teachers favoured affirmative over critical comments

Table 5. Distribution of reflective practice themes across the reviewed studies

Author/Year	Study ID No.	Forms and Levels of Reflective Practice	Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences	Reflective Practice as a Driver of Professional Development
Urzúa & Asención-Delaney (2023)	1	✓	✓	✓
Alt et al. (2021)	2	✓	✓	✓
Silva (2025)	3	✓	✓	✓
Arefian et al. (2026)	4	✓	✓	✓
Bachore et al. (2024)	5	✓	✓	✓
Burhan-Horasanli & Hart (2024)	6	✓	✓	✓
Chen & Chen (2022)	7	✓	✓	✓
Tovey & Skolits (2021)	8	✓	✓	✓

Author/Year	Study ID No.	Forms and Levels of Reflective Practice	Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences	Reflective Practice as a Driver of Professional Development
Cirocki & Indrarathne (2024)	9	✓	✓	✓
Cole et al. (2022)	10	✓	✓	✓
Körkkö et al. (2024)	11	X	✓	✓
DeLuca et al. (2023)	12	✓	✓	✓
Patel (2021)	13	✓	✓	✓
Erbilgin & Robinson (2025)	14	✓	✓	✓
Fathi et al. (2024)	15	✓	✓	✓
Gebremariam & Sisay (2024)	16	X	✓	✓
Gudeta (2022)	17	✓	✓	✓
Haile et al. (2024)	18	✓	✓	✓
Holden (2023)	19	✓	✓	✓
Hosseinnia et al. (2025)	20	✓	✓	✓
Hummes & Seckel (2024)	21	✓	✓	✓
Hyde (2024)	22	✓	✓	X
Kaloudis et al. (2025)	23	✓	✓	✓
Suphasri (2021)	24	X	✓	✓
Kolajo (2025)	25	✓	✓	✓
Afrilyasanti et al. (2025)	26	✓	✓	✓
Lefebvre et al. (2022)	27	✓	✓	✓
Lefebvre et al. (2023)	28	✓	✓	✓
Lepp et al. (2023)	29	✓	✓	✓
Leibur & Saks (2025)	30	✓	✓	✓
Lim et al. (2022)	31	X	✓	✓
Lim et al. (2023)	32	X	✓	✓
Machost & Stains (2023)	33	✓	✓	X
Maharjan et al. (2024)	34	✓	✓	✓
Mohamed et al. (2022)	35	✓	✓	X
Novoa-Echaurren et al. (2025)	36	✓	✓	✓
Philp-Clark & Grieshaber (2023)	37	✓	✓	X
Pinnegar & Lay (2023)	38	✓	✓	✓
Desmet & Roberts (2022)	39	✓	✓	✓
Rushton et al. (2023)	40	X	✓	✓
Saeidi et al. (2024)	41	X	✓	✓
Camus et al. (2023)	42	✓	✓	✓
Sudirman et al. (2024)	43	✓	✓	✓
Taddese & Rao (2022)	44	✓	✓	✓
Tight (2023)	45	✓	✓	X

Author/Year	Study ID No.	Forms and Levels of Reflective Practice	Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences	Reflective Practice as a Driver of Professional Development
Tobin et al. (2025)	46	✓	✓	✓
Weisi & Salari (2024)	47	✓	✓	✓
Zohrabi & Xodabande (2024)	48	✓	✓	✓
Abbaspour et al. (2024)	49	✓	✓	✓
Yagata (2025)	50	✓	✓	✓
Number of studies	50	44	50	45

3.1 Forms and Levels of Reflective Practice

The key sub-themes identified within this category are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. Summary of Sub-themes: Forms and Levels of Reflective Practice

Sub-theme	Key Finding
Reflection-in/on/for-Action	Reflection-on-action dominates; reflection-in-action is rare and linked to experienced teachers
Surface vs. Critical Reflection	Critical reflection remains underutilized; structured interventions improve depth
Collaborative & Technology-Mediated	Peer and digital tools expand reflective capacity beyond individual journaling

3.1.1 Forms of Reflective Practice

The most common form documented is reflection - on - action - retrospective analysis conducted after lessons, typically through journaling (Bachore et al., 2024; Weisi & Salari, 2024; Hosseinnia et al., 2025). Reflection-in-action was considerably less prevalent: teachers reported it as cognitively difficult given the simultaneous demands of instruction, and it is typically associated with more experienced practitioners (Taddese & Rao, 2022; Hyde, 2024).

A less-studied form is reflection-for-action: a prospective orientation in which teachers mentally rehearse lesson scenarios to anticipate problems before instruction (Burhan-Horasanli & Ortactepe Hart, 2024).

3.1.2 Surface-Level vs. Critical Reflection

The analysis reveals a gap between descriptive and critical reflection, as English teachers, as with foreign language teachers, primarily recounted lesson events and did not question the underlying pedagogical decisions. Moreover, they limited themselves to superficial interactions rather than value-oriented inquiry (Gudeta, 2022; Zohrabi &

Khodabande, 2024; Mohamed et al., 2022).

Structured introduction to critical incident methodology significantly improved the depth of participants' reflection on classroom events (Silva, 2025). Assessment dynamics also shaped whether genuine critical reflection developed (DeLuca et al., 2023; Desmet & Roberts, 2022).

A ten-week action-research intervention in physical education showed a gradual shift from technical to critical reflection, with deepening attention to pedagogical values (Kaloudis et al., 2025; Pinnegar & Lay, 2023).

3.1.3 Collaborative and Technology-Mediated Reflection

Collaborative reflection consistently produced deeper engagement than individual modes. Dialogic structures in online lesson study cycles facilitated examination of pedagogical assumptions (Holden, 2023), and video-based collaborative analysis improved reflective ability (Hummes & Seckel, 2024; Tobin et al., 2025). Peer reflective journals generated rich socio-cultural negotiation, with teachers navigating language choice and

interpersonal dynamics when commenting on one another's practice (Yagata, 2025).

Technology-enhanced platforms expanded the possibilities for collaborative reflection when integrated with supervisory dialogue (Leibur & Saks, 2025), though the initial experience of video-based self-reflection was often simultaneously transformative and anxiety-provoking, underscoring the importance of psychological safety (Lepp et al., 2023).

3.2 Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences of Reflective Practice

The key sub-themes identified within this category are summarized in Table 7.

Table 7. Summary of Sub-themes: Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences of Reflective Practice

Sub-theme	Key Finding
Perceived Benefits & Motivation	Teachers value structured reflection; benefits are conditional on institutional support
Barriers & Structural Constraints	Time pressure, ambiguity, and lack of training are the primary barriers
Contextual Enablers	Leadership support and formal training consistently enable deeper reflection

3.2.1 Perceived Benefits and Motivational Dimensions

Teachers described reflective practice as beneficial when structured and purposeful: sustained engagement fostered effectiveness and professional emancipation (Maharjan et al., 2024), with early-stage reflection focused on classroom management and later stages extending to ethical questions about the values underpinning teaching (Patel, 2021).

3.2.2 Barriers and Structural Constraints

The reviewed studies identify persistent personal and structural barriers to reflective practice. Time constraints and uncertainty about how to incorporate reflection are the most frequently cited obstacles (Lim et al., 2023; Lim et al., 2022). Cultures prioritizing content delivery left little normative space for reflection, and workload expectations made it practically inaccessible despite its theoretical endorsement (Gebremariam & Sisay, 2024). Even after formal training, teachers held vague views on what reflection requires, and many

possessed reflective vocabulary but did not possess the tools for its application (Körkkö et al., 2024; Saeidi et al., 2024).

3.2.3 Contextual Enablers of Reflection

Leadership support and institutional recognition were the most frequently cited enablers of sustained practice (Abbaspour et al., 2024), with protected time for collaborative reflection central to teachers' perceptions of institutional support (Tobin et al., 2025). Reflection tools deepened practice when mentor support was accessible (Lefebvre et al., 2022; Lefebvre et al., 2023), and formal training in critical incident analysis improved reflective depth among in-service teachers (Silva, 2025; Desmet & Roberts, 2022).

3.3 Reflective Practice as a Driver of Professional Development

The key sub-themes identified within this category are summarized in Table 8.

Table 8. Summary of Sub-themes: Reflective Practice as a Driver of Professional Development

Sub-theme	Key Finding
Teaching Quality & Practice Change	Structured reflection improves curriculum alignment and questioning strategies
Professional Identity & Self-Efficacy	Sustained reflection shapes identity and fosters agency among teachers
Early-Career and Long-Term Habits	Early reflective habits in training predict stronger long-term professional behavior

3.3.1 Impact on Teaching Quality and Practice Change

Consistent, structured reflective practice improves teaching quality. A three-week action research program showed increased pedagogical flexibility and a more student-centered learning (Cirocki & Indrarathne, 2024), and EFL teachers using structured reflective assignments gradually expanded question types beyond simple recall (Haile et al., 2024; Fathi et al., 2024).

3.3.2 Professional Identity, Self-Efficacy, and Agency

Reflective practice shapes professional identity: sustained critical engagement allows teachers to articulate who they are as professionals, beyond technical competence (Rushton et al., 2023). It

fosters self-efficacy by enabling teachers to identify weaknesses and monitor growth (Maharjan et al., 2024), and as reflections became more relationship-oriented, teachers described growing professional responsibility extending beyond content delivery to pedagogical care (Patel, 2021).

3.3.3 Early-Career and Long-Term Professional Habits

Structured reflective preparation influences subsequent professional behaviour, with the sheltered practice model producing deeper epistemological understanding than traditional formats (Desmet & Roberts, 2022). Sustained engagement is associated

with lifelong learning dispositions (Alt et al., 2021), yet even early-career teachers with formal training demonstrated limited understanding of what genuine reflection requires (Körkkö et al., 2024), pointing to the need for practitioner-oriented approaches.

4. Discussion

Labelling a practice as reflective is insufficient to generate critical self-examination (Mohamed et al., 2022; Tight, 2023). Shared participation consistently deepened reflective quality (Holden, 2023; Hummes & Seckel, 2024), and ChatGPT-mediated reflection produced more explicit, evidence-based reasoning (Sudirman et al., 2024; Leibur & Saks, 2025).

Table 9 presents the geographical distribution of the 50 included studies, organized by region and categorized according to whether the study was conducted in an EFL or a non-EFL context.

Table 9. Geographical Distribution of Included Studies: EFL vs. Non-EFL Contexts

Region	Countries (n studies)	EFL-Context Studies	Non-EFL-Context Studies	Total	Key Reflective Themes
Middle East & Central Asia	Iran (10): Arefian et al., 2026; Fathi et al., 2024; Hosseinnia et al., 2025; Saeidi et al., 2024; Weisi & Salari, 2024; Zohrabi & Xodabande, 2024; Abbaspour et al., 2024; + 3 additional studies	9 (EFL teacher education; CPD for language teachers)	1 (Abbaspour et al., 2024 - school admin / CPD)	10	Collaborative reflection; ChatGPT-mediated reflection; peer feedback cycles
Sub-Saharan Africa	Ethiopia (5): Bachore et al., 2024; Gebremariam & Sisay, 2024; Gudeta, 2022; Haile et al., 2024; Taddese & Rao, 2022 Nigeria (1): Kolajo, 2025	2 (Gudeta, 2022; Haile et al., 2024 - EFL secondary/higher ed.)	4 (primary, secondary, higher ed.)	6	Surface-level vs. critical reflection; institutional barriers; lack of structured CPD
North America	USA (8): Urzúa & Asención-Delaney, 2023; Silva, 2025; Tovey & Skolits, 2021; Erbilgin & Robinson, 2025; Machost & Stains, 2023; Pinnegar & Lay, 2023; Desmet & Roberts, 2022; + 1 other Canada (5): Burhan-Horasanli & Hart, 2024; Patel, 2021; Lefebvre et al., 2022; Lefebvre et al., 2023; + one additional study	1 (Urzúa & Asención-Delaney, 2023 - language teacher ed.)	12 (STEM, service learning, lesson study, teacher ed.)	13	Reflective journaling; lesson study; professional identity; self-efficacy
East & Southeast Asia	China (1): Chen & Chen, 2022 Singapore (2): Lim et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2023 Thailand (1): Suphasri, 2021 Indonesia (2): Afrilyasanti et al., 2025; Sudirman et al., 2024 Hong Kong (1): Camus et al., 2023 Malaysia (1): Mohamed et al., 2022	3 (Suphasri, 2021; Sudirman, 2024; Yagata, 2025 - EFL teacher ed.)	6 (public health, service learning, K-12, higher ed.)	9	Technology-mediated reflection; collaborative reflection; reflective journaling

Region	Countries (n studies)	EFL-Context Studies	Non-EFL-Context Studies	Total	Key Reflective Themes
South & Central Asia	Nepal (1): Maharjan et al., 2024 Israel (1): Alt et al., 2021	0	2 (school-based CPD; higher education)	2	Reflective journals; lifelong learning dispositions
Latin America	Ecuador (1): Cirocki & Indrarathne, 2024 Brazil/Chile (1): Hummes & Seckel, 2024 Chile (1): Novoa-Echaurren et al., 2025	1 (Cirocki & Indrarathne, 2024 - EFL CPD)	2 (teacher training, lesson study, university CPD)	3	EFL CPD; lesson study; university-level reflective communities
Oceania / Pacific	Australia (2): DeLuca et al., 2023; Philp-Clark & Grieshaber, 2023 Bhutan (1, multi-country): DeLuca et al., 2023	0	2 (teacher ed., early childhood ed.)	2 (excl. Bhutan overlap)	Critical reflection; early childhood professional learning
Multi-country	Canada/Turkey (1): Burhan-Horasanli & Hart, 2024 Australia/Bhutan/Canada (1): DeLuca et al., 2023	0	2 (comparative CPD; comparative teacher ed.)	2	Cross-cultural CPD comparison; international teacher ed. frameworks
TOTAL	24 countries / territories	16	35	50	

5. Recommendations

	Recommendation 1	Recommendation 2
For Teachers	Use structured frameworks such as Gibbs's reflective cycle or the critical incident method to provide a consistent basis for classroom analysis.	Establish peer observation cycles and collaborative inquiry groups to deepen reflective quality beyond individual journaling (Tobin et al., 2025; Holden, 2023); video-based tools support precise self-analysis (Leibur & Saks, 2025).
For Educational Institutions	Cultivate institutional cultures that treat pedagogical inquiry as a professional strength, supporting sustained and critical reflection.	Provide protected time, formal development frameworks, and cross-career communities of practice (Cirocki & Indrarathne, 2024; Afrilyasanti et al., 2025).
For Policymakers	Design accountability frameworks that distinguish genuine critical inquiry from surface-level compliance, using qualitative indicators of growth rather than frequency metrics.	Ensure policy guidance acknowledges variation across EFL, mainstream, and higher education settings.
For Teacher Education Programs	Design programs that model critical reflection, support it dialogically, and embed it in authentic practicum tasks.	Reward critical self-examination over reproduction of expected reflective language to reduce performative compliance (Mohamed et al., 2022).

6. Limitations

Several limitations come into effect. English-language inclusion risks skewing the synthesis toward Anglophone framings of reflective practice. The wide range of educational contexts complicates methodological comparison, and CASP assessment involves interpretive judgment. Cross-sectional designs limit conclusions about career-stage development, self-report data may not capture actual behaviour, and restricting to five databases may have missed regional sources or introduced publication bias toward positive findings.

7. Future Research Directions and Research Gaps

Priority areas include longitudinal studies tracking reflective skills across career stages and research in understudied contexts to address the geographical imbalance in existing literature.

8. Conclusion

This synthesis confirms that reflective practice holds considerable potential as a driver of professional development, yet that potential is frequently unrealized. Critical, collaborative reflection remains the exception: most teachers default to surface-level engagement with immediate technical problems rather than pursuing the deeper inquiry that theory prescribes. Genuine professional growth requires institutional conditions that enable sustained reflection; bridging this theory-practice divide is the central challenge for the field.

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Appendix A

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

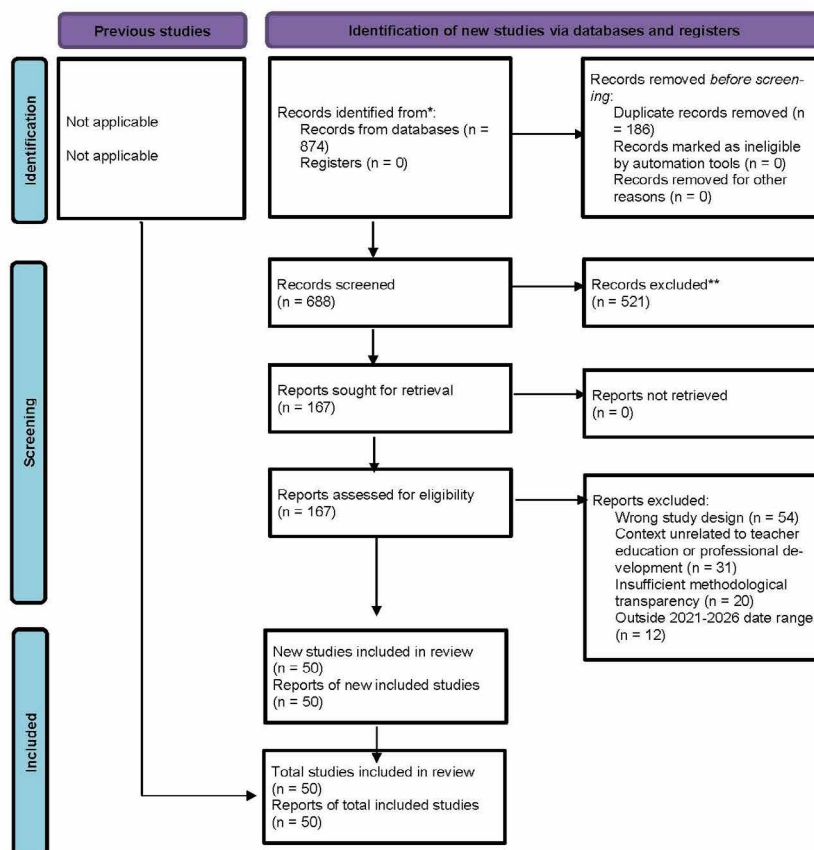


Table A1: PRISMA 2020 Checklist for Systematic Reviews

Section / Topic	Item #	Checklist Item	Location
Title	1	Identify the report as a systematic review.	Title page
Abstract	2	See the PRISMA 2020 for Abstracts checklist.	Abstract
Rationale	3	Describe the rationale for the review in the context of existing knowledge.	Introduction
Objectives	4	Provide an explicit statement of the objective(s) or question(s) the review addresses.	Introduction
Eligibility criteria	5	Specify the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the review and how studies were grouped for the synthesis.	§2.2

Section / Topic	Item #	Checklist Item	Location
Information sources	6	Specify all databases, registers, websites, organisations, reference lists, and other sources searched or consulted to identify studies. Specify the date when each source was last searched or consulted.	§2.3
Search strategy	7	Present the full search strategies for all databases, registers, and websites, including any filters and limits used.	§2.3; Table 2
Selection process	8	Specify the methods used to decide whether a study met the inclusion criteria of the review, including how many reviewers screened each record and each report retrieved, whether they worked independently, and if applicable, details of automation tools used in the process.	§2.3
Data collection process	9	Specify the methods used to collect data from reports, including how many reviewers collected data from each report, whether they worked independently, any processes for obtaining or confirming data from study investigators, and if applicable, details of automation tools used in the process.	§2.4
Data items	10a	List and define all outcomes for which data were sought.	§2.4
Data items	10b	List and define all other variables for which data were sought (e.g. participant and intervention characteristics, funding sources).	§2.4
Study risk of bias assessment	11	Specify the methods used to assess risk of bias in the included studies, including details of the tool(s) used, how many reviewers assessed each study and whether they worked independently, and if applicable, details of automation tools were used in the process.	§2.3 (CASP)
Effect measures	12	Specify for each outcome the effect measure(s) used in the synthesis or presentation of results.	N/A - qualitative review
Synthesis methods	13a	Describe the processes used to decide which studies were eligible for each synthesis.	§2.5
Synthesis methods	13b	Describe any methods required to prepare the data for presentation or synthesis.	§2.5

Section / Topic	Item #	Checklist Item	Location
Synthesis methods	13c	Describe any methods used to tabulate or visually display results of individual studies and syntheses.	§2.5; Table 3
Synthesis methods	13d	Describe any methods used to synthesize results and provide a rationale for the choice(s).	§2.5
Synthesis methods	13e	Describe any methods used to explore possible causes of heterogeneity among study results (e.g. subgroup analysis, meta-regression).	N/A - qualitative review
Synthesis methods	13f	Describe any sensitivity analyses conducted to assess robustness of the synthesized results.	N/A - qualitative review
Reporting bias assessment	14	Describe any methods used to assess risk of bias due to missing results in a synthesis (arising from reporting biases).	§5 (Limitations)
Certainty assessment	15	Describe any methods used to assess certainty (or confidence) in the body of evidence for an outcome.	§2.3 (CASP)
Study selection	16a	Describe the results of the search and selection process, including the number of records identified, screened, assessed for eligibility, and included, using a flow diagram (PRISMA 2020 flow diagram).	§2.3; Figure 1
Study selection	16b	Cite studies that might appear to meet the inclusion criteria but which were excluded, and explain why they were excluded.	§2.2
Study characteristics	17	Cite each included study and present its characteristics.	§3; Table 4
Risk of bias in studies	18	Present assessments of risk of bias for each included study.	§2.3 (CASP scores 710-)
Results of individual studies	19	For all outcomes, present a summary of the results for each study.	§3
Results of syntheses	20a	For each synthesis, briefly summarise the characteristics and risk of bias among contributing studies.	§3

Section / Topic	Item #	Checklist Item	Location
Results of syntheses	20b	Present results of all statistical syntheses conducted.	N/A - qualitative review
Results of syntheses	20c	Present results of any investigations of possible causes of heterogeneity among study results.	N/A - qualitative review
Results of syntheses	20d	Present results of any sensitivity analyses.	N/A - qualitative review
Reporting biases	21	Present assessments of risk of bias due to missing results (arising from reporting biases) for each synthesis assessed.	§5 (Limitations)
Certainty of evidence	22	Present assessments of certainty (or confidence) in the body of evidence for each outcome assessed.	N/A - qualitative review
Discussion	23a	Provide a general interpretation of the results in the context of other evidence.	§4
Discussion	23b	Discuss any limitations of the evidence included in the review.	§5
Discussion	23c	Discuss any limitations of the review processes used.	§5
Discussion	23d	Discuss implications of the results for practice, policy, and future research.	§4; §6
Registration and protocol	24a	Provide registration information for the review, including register name and registration number, or state that the review was not registered.	N/A
Registration and protocol	24b	Indicate where the review protocol can be accessed, or state that a protocol was not prepared.	N/A
Support	25	Describe sources of financial or other support for the review, and the role of the funders or sponsors in the review.	N/A
Competing interests	26	Declare any competing interests of review authors.	N/A
Availability of data, code, and other materials	27	Report which of the following are publicly available and where they can be found: template data collection forms; data extracted from included studies; data used for all analyses; analytic code; any other materials used in the review.	Available on request

Appendix B

• Full Boolean Search String and Search Parameters

1. B.1 Search Date Range and Language Criteria

Date range: January 2021 to June 2026. Only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English were included; conference papers, book chapters, dissertations, theses, and grey literature were excluded.

2. B.2 Complete Boolean Search String

The following Boolean search strings were applied across all five databases: ("Reflective Practice" OR "Reflective Teaching" OR "Teacher Reflection" OR "Critical Reflection" OR "Reflexive Practice") AND ("In-service Teacher"

OR "Practising Teacher*" OR "Experienced Teacher*" OR "Professional Development") AND ("Qualitative" OR "Interview" OR "Case Study" OR "Phenomenolog*" OR "Ethnograph*" OR "Thematic Analysis" OR "Content Analysis") AND ("EFL" OR "ESL" OR "English Language Teaching" OR "Foreign Language Teacher*" OR "Second Language Teacher*" OR "Language Teacher*")

Note: Asterisks (*) denote truncation (e.g., teacher/teachers). The string was adapted for database-specific syntax where required.

3. B.3 Deduplication Procedure

The combined search yielded 874 records; following automated and manual deduplication, 688 unique records were retained for screening (see Appendix A for the PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram).