Exploring In-Service English Teachers' Reflective Practice for Professional Development in Chinese Higher Education

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Reflective practice is widely recognized as an essential component of teacher professional development (TPD), and journal writing is an effective way to enhance teachers' engagement in it. This study explores how in-service English teachers perceive and implement reflective practice, and how it contributes to their professional growth. Despite its importance, few studies have systematically examined how experienced teachers reflect on their English teaching. Using a mixed-methods approach, this research analysed six weeks of reflective journals written by six in-service English teachers with 7–26 years of experience, employing thematic analysis. It also incorporated open-ended survey responses from over 180 teachers, analysed using multiple response analysis (MRA) to triangulate and complement findings. Five key focusing areas emerged: (1) evaluating teaching, (2) approaches and methods, (3) theories of teaching, (4) self-awareness, and (5) cross-cultural communication. Survey results confirmed the significant role of reflection in TPD, and revealed after-lesson individual reflection was the most common practice. The study offers insights into how experienced English teachers reflect on their teaching practices and how such reflection supports their professional development, providing practical implications for future TPD initiatives.

Keywords: reflective practice, teacher professional development, reflective journal writing, in-service English teachers, Chinese higher education, mixed method

INTRODUCTION

Teachers play a crucial role in the realm of education, facing the perpetual struggle of keeping abreast of the swiftly advancing knowledge within their domain. Enhancing the calibre of education has led to a pronounced emphasis on teacher professional development (TPD), involving the continual enhancement of professional skills and introspection into pedagogical methodologies (Loughran et al., 2022).Teachers possess the professional knowledge, skills, and abilities that are the foundation of teaching

expertise (Loughran et al., 2022) and transform their knowledge into practice to be beneficial to their students' growth and achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Sancar et al., 2021). Professional development is a lifelong learning process through formal and informal learning opportunities. It enables teachers to demonstrate their professional competence and apply their knowledge in practice to support learning (Desimone, 2009; Cirocki & Farrell, 2019; Farrell, 2021).

Reflection has been widely recognized as a key driver of this development. Reflection is considered the linking bridge of theory, knowledge, and practice (Korthagen & Nuijten, 2022), which applies to the entire learning and practice process to help advance teachers' knowledge, skills, and abilities (Thompson, 2021). Reflective practice should be encouraged among language teachers because it can guide them to become self-conscious practitioners, and reflection will become the teacher's internal quality that helps teachers gain professional growth and development (Chu & Zhang, 2014; Farrell, 2015; Cirocki & Farrell, 2017; Loughran et al., 2022). In language education specifically, reflection allows teachers to better understand the complexities of classroom interaction, the demands of curriculum implementation, and the cultural dimensions of language learning.

With the advancement of the reform of higher education in China, English language education has been a significant curriculum requirement in higher education in China. To meet the requirements of talent cultivation goals, the Chinese government has introduced a series of policies to support the professional development of teachers and focus on the construction of a high-quality teaching team in higher education. Documents such as the Guideline for College English Teaching (2020) highlight the necessity for English teachers to actively upgrade their knowledge and teaching strategies to meet the evolving needs of college learners. It also emphasises the importance of promoting TPD at both institutional and individual levels, providing a policy foundation for exploring effective strategies for the professional development of in-service English teachers. However, it does not specify concrete pathways for such development. The present research focuses on reflective practice to examine its impact in the context of Chinese higher education. While much attention has been given to pre-service and novice teachers, little is known about how experienced, in-service university English teachers reflect on their own classroom practice, what themes they focus on, and how they perceive its value for professional growth. Particularly lacking are studies that systematically examine teachers' own reflective journals as authentic records of reflective practice. This study responds to these gaps by adopting a qualitative-driven mixed methods approach and aims to explore in-service English teachers' engagement with reflective practice and its role in supporting TPD in Chinese higher education. Drawing on data from teacher-generated reflective journals and open-ended survey responses, we aim to explore the main focusing areas on teachers' reflective journals and how teachers understand and engage in reflective practice in relation to their professional development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reflective Practice and Teacher Professional Development

The core elements to improve the quality of education are the high level of teachers' educational concepts and professional capabilities (Avalos, 2011; Farrell, 2014, 2018; Gao & Zhang, 2020; Chu et al., 2021; Han & Wang, 2021). Teachers can achieve their professional development through formal in-service training programs as well as self-initiated and self-directed informal approaches (Farrell, 2021; Cirocki & Farrell, 2019). This occurs through daily activities such as planning lessons collaboratively, conducting assessment, reviewing curriculum, or reading professional journals or magazines (Guskey, 2000). Reflective practice helps to capture these moments by embedding teacher learning into the fabric of their daily instruction.

Many TPD programs are not very effective, mainly because they offer few opportunities for teachers to apply newly acquired skills in authentic contexts, and because follow-up support is often lacking once teachers return to their classrooms (Popova et al., 2022). Wallace (1991) proposes a reflective model for the training and development of foreign language teachers, which emphasises the cultivation of reflective awareness throughout the professional growth process. Teachers are encouraged to continuously reflect on their educational philosophies and instructional behaviours, leading to self-adjustment and ongoing reconstruction of professional knowledge.

The importance and effectiveness of reflective practice in supporting teacher development are widely recognized. In China, Qi and Wang (2020) emphasise that reflection serves as the foundation of inquiry communities, enabling college English teachers to engage in continuous learning and professional growth through collaborative exploration and action. Based on a study of English classroom dialogue teaching, Zou and Fu (2021) demonstrate that reflective interviews are a key mechanism to facilitate teacher reflection, enabling them to critically evaluate and revise their instructional beliefs and practices. Nevertheless, English teachers' limited awareness of reflection continues to hinder their professional growth. In many cases, professional development programs are criticized as overly theoretical, lacking contextual relevance, and too passive to lead to real instructional improvement (Loyalka et al., 2019). Teaching and learning are complex and evolving processes, in which teachers are not only required to learn but also to learn how to learn. Ultimately, professional development means transforming knowledge and skills into effective practice that benefits student learning (Avalos, 2011; Loughran et al., 2022).

However, despite widespread acknowledgment of the value of reflective practice, there remains a limited understanding of how experienced in-service teachers, particularly in EFL higher education settings, engage in reflective activities to support their development. Few studies have explored the specific areas teachers reflect on in their journals or how such reflections translate into meaningful change in practice. This gap underscores the need to investigate not only the perceived value of reflection but also its content and application in authentic teaching contexts.

Reflective Journal Writing

According to Ho and Richards (1993), journal writing allows teachers to engage in a more profound awareness and reaction to their teaching. Farrell (2021) points out that writing teaching journals can help teachers articulate their ideas and investigate their beliefs and behaviours. It provides access to the hidden affective variables that greatly influence the way teachers teach, and students learn.

The content of teachers' reflective journals mainly records various things in the classroom teaching process, covering teachers' understanding and thinking about their teaching processes, from which you can see how teachers reflect, what content has been reflected, what problems have been encountered, and whether there are changes in teaching practice (Rui, 2011). Making regular and detailed records in a personal journal, followed by an analysis of behaviour reoccurrence patterns or salient events, is essential for daily learning and teaching. Reflective journals can help teachers or educators realize their weaknesses, seek improvements, and connect their existing knowledge and experience with new ones (Ho & Richards, 1993; Abednia et al., 2013; Stevens & Cooper, 2023).

Although reflective journals have specific deficiencies, such as content subjectivity, they are considered effective in promoting the professional development of foreign language teachers. Keeping reflective journals is thought to improve teachers' critical thinking since it enables them to reconsider their understanding of their teaching practice through a process of self-discovery and thinking about many aspects of teaching, considering personal and contextual circumstances (Abednia et al., 2013).

In essence, writing a reflective journal is a process of introspection, which can help teachers internalize explicit theoretical knowledge, further critical reflection, support transformational learning, and promote professional development (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1987; Stevens & Cooper, 2023). Continuous review, reflection, analysis, and practice through reflective journals are not only a method and means to cultivate teachers' reflective ability but also can improve their teaching practice. At the same time, as qualitative research data of the current investigation, reflective journals contain much potential information that remains unnoticeable to the recording teachers **themselves**. However, from the researchers' perspective, after repeated analysis, it is helpful to discover and reveal many deeper problems that cannot be observed in English teaching practice. However, despite the demonstrated value of reflective journals, few studies have systematically analysed the content of such reflections among experienced in-service English teachers in Chinese higher education.

METHOD

The present study focuses on reflective practices of in-service English teachers in Chinese higher education and how reflection can positively influence teachers' professional development. To gain comprehensive insights, this research adopted a mixed-methods approach with a concurrent triangulation design. It combined qualitative data from teacher reflective journals with quantitative findings generated by analysing open-ended survey responses using multiple response analysis (MRA). Thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data by NVivo 14, capturing individual

reflective experiences and the content. The quantitative data provided broader insights into reflective engagement, which also served as methodological triangulation to validate and reinforce the findings derived from journal analysis. Concurrent triangulation can help to cross-validate and fully confirm findings (Greene et al., 1989; Creswell et al., 2003).

Participants

The participants were in-service English teachers from public universities in Hebei Province, China. For reflective journal writing, six teachers with 7 to 26 years of teaching experience were selected through purposive sampling, which means samples are chosen according to the specific purpose or intention (Cohen et al., 2002; Creswell, 2012). In many cases, purposive sampling aims to help researchers gain in-depth knowledge and information from people who have access to expertise and experience about issues and fields (Ball, 1990; Cohen et al., 2002). Before participating, teachers were informed of the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. They could withdraw at any time without any consequences. The participants chosen focused on experienced and expert teachers (Table 1). They were believed to provide much deeper information about reflective practice.

Table 1
Demographic data of the respondents

Teachers	Teaching Experience	Academic Degree	Professional Title
Teacher 1 (T1)	26 years	Master	Associate Professor
Teacher 2 (T2)	22 years	Master	Associate Professor
Teacher 3 (T3)	15 years	Master	Lecturer
Teacher 4 (T4)	15 years	Master	Lecturer
Teacher 5 (T5)	10 years	Master	Lecturer
Teacher 6 (T6)	7 years	Master	Lecturer

For survey data, 182 in-service English teachers from universities in Hebei Province, China, participated. The respondents represented various career stages, including assistants, lecturers, associate professors, and professors, with teaching experience ranging from less than five years to over 25 years. These professional titles reflect the standard academic hierarchy in Chinese higher education, typically based on teaching experience and academic achievements. The survey explored teachers' perceptions of reflection, reflection timeline, and their reflective instruments and strategies. Since participation in open-ended questions was voluntary, the number of valid responses varied across questions, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
The total number of responses for each question

Question Number	Topic	Valid Responses	Response Rate
1	The Role Reflection Plays in TPD	170	93.4%
2	Reflection Timeline	182	100%
3	Reflective Instruments	175	96.2%
4	Reflective Strategies	162	89.0%

Data Collection and Analysis

This paper aims to address these two research questions:

RQ1: What are the main focusing areas on teachers' reflective journals?
RQ2: How do teachers understand and engage in reflective practice in relation to their professional development?

Reflective journals were used to collect qualitative data for RQ1, exploring teachers' focusing areas on their reflective practices, which were analysed by thematic analysis. The six experienced English teachers wrote weekly reflective journals over six weeks, resulting in a total of 36 journal entries for data collection. Before writing, we introduced participating teachers to basic theories and strategies for teaching reflection. Since these chosen teachers were experienced teachers, they did not need to pay special attention to writing styles or structural framework, as long as the meaning was clearly expressed and kept faithful to describe their classroom teaching experience, as well as the analysis and judgment of specific issues. The present analysis adopted both inductive and deductive coding approaches (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing for a comprehensive interpretation of the qualitative data. Pre-determined themes were derived from Ho and Richards' (1993) framework, which categorized key focus areas of teachers' reflective practices. At the same time, new emerging themes were identified from raw data generated by teacher participants, ensuring that both theoretical expectations and participant-driven insights were considered in the analysis.

The survey provided a broader insight into teachers' engagement in reflective practices for RQ2. The questions examined teachers' beliefs about reflection, timing, and reflective strategies. Quantitative data was collected by a widely used online system, "Wen Juan Xing," and analysed by multiple response analysis.

FINDINGS

The first research question is to explore in-service teachers' reflective practices through reflective journal writing about the teaching process in their English courses. According to the six phases of thematic analysis, we read teachers' journals line by line to gain an in-depth understanding. Through this process, we identified codes, clustered them into categories, and summarized the themes, which are shown in Table 3. There were five focusing areas on teachers' reflective practice: (1) Theories of Teaching, (2) Approaches and Methods, (3) Evaluating Teaching, (4) Self-Awareness, and (5) Cross-Cultural Communication.

Table 3
Themes identified in teachers' reflective journals

Themes	Sub-themes
Evaluating Teaching	Evaluating lessons
	Diagnosing problems
	Solutions to problems
Approaches and Methods	The teacher's knowledge
	The learners
	Approaches and methods in teaching
	The content of a lesson
	The school context
Theories of Teaching	Theories and beliefs about teaching and learning
	Applying theories to classroom practice
Self-Awareness	Perceptions of themselves as teachers
	Recognition of personal growth
	Setting personal goal
Cross-Cultural Communication	Cultural integration and conflict

Theme 1: Evaluating Teaching

Among the five categories identified, in-service teachers had the highest level of involvement in evaluating teaching. It comprised three sub-themes: (1) evaluating lessons, (2) diagnosing problems, and (3) solving problems.

a. Evaluating Lessons

In journals, teachers have mentioned that they often reflected on their lessons, offering both positive and negative evaluations. This was the most frequently mentioned aspect. Positive reflections emphasised aspects such as the effectiveness of their teaching practices, students' active engagement, a productive classroom atmosphere, and the achievement of instructional objectives.

> *"Most students were able to concentrate better on the class and actively participate in discussion activities." (T5)*

Conversely, two teachers mentioned negative evaluations of their teaching, highlighting areas for improvement, including time management, teaching methods, and specific aspects that teachers thought did not meet the requirements. Such reflections provided insights into areas requiring attention, enabling teachers to identify areas for improving their teaching practices.

b. Diagnosing Problems

Diagnosing problems was another critical focus, including students' problems, teachers' problems, and classroom interaction. Among them, students' problems were the most frequently discussed. All six teachers have mentioned students' problems related to their English learning, the learning atmosphere, motivation, and the completion of assignments.

> *"Those with a lower level of proficiency say they cannot understand the words, can't react, and can't keep up with others. They always feel frustrated and want to give up." (T3)*

These reflections revealed that teachers not only reflected on the classroom situation but also reflected on students' problems discovered before and after class. Classroom interaction emphasised the interaction between teachers and students, and poor group dynamics.

> *"The above phenomenon reflects the gap in communication between teachers and students, which not only appears in foreign language classes but also exists in other subjects." (T2)*

It was worth affirming that when teachers realized these problems, they would make corresponding adjustments in class, and they would also reflect and adjust again after class to avoid the recurrence. This was probably the embodiment of the ability of experienced teachers.

c. Solutions to Problems

Solutions to problems included two sub-categories: deciding on a plan of action and alternative ways of presenting a lesson, which were mentioned by all six teachers. Reflection allowed teachers to modify their strategies and guide future teaching practices effectively.

> *"Therefore, I plan to design some targeted exercises later to help students improve their reading speed and depth." (T5)*

Alternative methods were implemented both before and after class. Collaboration with colleagues also played a significant role, as teachers often discussed classroom issues to identify more effective teaching strategies. Just as T3 noted, "After class, I discussed with my colleagues and exchanged our opinions to seek alternative ways." Experienced teachers anticipated problems or situations that might arise in the classroom during the lesson preparation stage, as well as the corresponding solutions.

Theme 2: Approaches and Methods

Teaching approaches and methods encompassed five sub-themes: teachers' knowledge, approaches and methods in teaching, the learners, the lesson content, and the school context.

a. The Teacher's Knowledge

The teachers' knowledge was the most frequently mentioned among all categories, categorized into three sub-categories: knowledge and experience, pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), and technological pedagogical and content knowledge (TPACK). Teachers highlighted how their experience and pedagogical understanding informed student-centred lesson design.

> *"Students are fully capable of learning it on their own. The role of the teacher is more reflected in organizing discussions, guiding students to brainstorm more cultural symbols, and expanding the extension of the text." (T5)*

Flexibility was also a recurring theme. Experienced teachers' adjustments enabled them to respond dynamically to classroom challenges. Based on PCK, teachers demonstrated their ability to integrate subject matter with pedagogical strategies so that they could make adjustments and respond dynamically to classroom challenges. Teachers also acknowledged the role of TPACK in effective instruction and believed that they needed to learn and grasp this knowledge. T6 advocated adopting blended teaching methods and multimedia tools to enhance participation. Such reflections highlight the growing reliance on technology to support diverse learning needs.

b. Learners

Reflections on learners not only focused on students' completion of their tasks, their feedback, and interaction in various classroom activities but also the background information such as students' knowledge and abilities (T1). These reflections underscore teachers' attention to individual and collective learner needs.

c. Approaches and Methods in Teaching

Teachers' reflections on teaching approaches emphasised strategies to enhance engagement and adapt to classroom dynamics. These insights reflected teachers' efforts to refine methods to suit diverse classroom contexts.

> *"I used teaching methods such as group discussion, presentation, and teacher comments to mobilize students' enthusiasm and create a relaxed and pleasant classroom atmosphere in which students can actively participate." (T3)*

d. The Content of a Lesson

Lesson content is often intertwined with teaching objectives and methods. It was mostly presented in the teacher's teaching plan, and reflections on content typically complemented broader instructional strategies.

e. School Context

Reflections related to school context were rarely included in teachers' journals, with only one teacher mentioning the relevant content, mainly about the school's endeavours to support teachers in their teaching and foster their professional development.

> *"The school has built smart classrooms and simulation laboratories, and has also purchased real-life oral software to provide students with opportunities to communicate with foreigners, either with real people or using AR software, encouraging students to speak English....Our university regularly invites experts or scholars in the field to give online or offline lectures to bring our teachers the latest cutting-edge research theories and results, which is a valuable learning opportunity. " (T1)*

These reflections illustrated the role of institutional investment in fostering teacher growth and enhancing instructional quality.

Theme 3: Theories of Teaching

Theories of teaching emerged as the third most frequently mentioned theme. It focused on teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning, their application in practice, and how classroom experiences influenced these theories. Two primary categories were identified: theories and beliefs about teaching and learning and applying theories to classroom practice. These were discussed by all six teachers in their journals, with a notable sub-theme, emotion, emerging under the first category.

a. Theories and Beliefs about Teaching and Learning

Teachers expressed their personal opinions on issues that happened in class through classroom observations. They focused on the effectiveness of teaching strategies, classroom atmosphere, and students' engagement. Notably, teachers were very concerned about students' emotions and feelings. Teachers underscored the importance of emotional communication and creating a conducive classroom atmosphere as well as good interaction between students and teachers for optimal learning outcomes. The teachers also considered shaping students' values of great importance in students' growth:

> *"Guiding students' values is also very important in college English classes. In class, I often intentionally select some extension materials related to the unit theme to subtly shape students' values." (T5&T6)*

The relationship between teachers and students was relatively relaxed, friendly, and trusting when teachers considered students' feelings and emotions. Experienced teachers' reflections ran through the entire classroom teaching. They demonstrated flexibility, regularly revising their approaches in response to classroom dynamics.

b. Applying Theories to Classroom Practice

In this aspect, teachers paid attention to how theory was applied and changed, and the contradictions between theory and practice. When making teaching plans, all six teachers developed appropriate teaching methods and classroom activities based on experience. Then, they actively implemented and adjusted teaching strategies based on their observations in class. They tailored classroom activities to students' needs and evaluated their effectiveness afterward.

> *"The teaching strategy of this part is to fully mobilize the enthusiasm of students, let them face, process, and master some information by themselves first, and then complete the more difficult parts under the guidance of teachers." (T4)*

Reflective practices allowed teachers to assess their methods and refine their strategies for improved outcomes. All teachers reflected on how practical challenges reshaped their beliefs and methods, reinforcing the dynamic nature of teaching. Four teachers mentioned contradictions between theory and practice, emphasizing the need for flexibility.

Theme 4: Self-Awareness

Teachers' self-awareness, as highlighted in their reflective journals, encompassed three sub-themes, which are recognition of personal growth, perceptions of themselves as teachers, and setting personal goal. This theme reflected how teachers engaged in reflective practices to evaluate their growth, address challenges, and set aspirations for the future.

a. Recognition of Personal Growth

All teachers acknowledged the impact of reflection on their personal and professional growth. Reflective practice helped them foster self-improvement, particularly professional development, and identify areas of personal confusion. Teachers highlighted the role of reflection in professional development, noting how it encouraged lifelong learning, integration of updated knowledge, and collective reflective practices.

> *"I should integrate the concept of lifelong learning into teaching, keep learning in teaching...We can also learn from other colleagues' teaching and combine self-growth with the mutual benefit of teaching." (T3)*

The teachers specifically affirmed the importance of collective teaching and research, collaborative reflection, which enriched their perspectives and brought unexpected benefits. Despite their 7–26 years of teaching experience, teachers expressed their confusion about how to balance their routine teaching work, scientific research requirements, and professional growth. To address these challenges, they often turned to self-reflection or engaged in collective reflection with colleagues (T1).

b. Perceptions of Themselves as Teachers

Teachers' perceptions of themselves as teachers were mainly about teachers' teaching style and comments on teachers' language proficiency. Most teachers adopted a student-centred approach, adjusting strategies based on in-class observations and student feedback.

> *"Be student-oriented, leaving time for group discussions and joint problem solving, thereby increasing students' enthusiasm for learning and improving their ability to cooperate." (T5)*

Teachers' teaching styles and methods were not static but dynamic, tailored to class objectives, and aimed at achieving optimal outcomes.

c. Setting Personal Goals

Each teacher admitted that they would set personal goals during the reflective practice, focusing on the guidance for future teaching, setting teaching goals, reforming teaching methods and strategies, and continuous self-improvement and adaptation.

> *"It is necessary to continue to strengthen self-improvement and professional development and constantly improve my teaching ability and professional quality...and actively participate in group reflection and communication activities to improve myself." (T6)*

Theme 5: Cross-Cultural Communication

With the implementation of English teaching reforms in recent years, Chinese English classes have increasingly emphasised the practicality and auxiliary of English and have increasingly focused on the exchange and integration of Chinese and English cultures. Cross-cultural communication emerged from teachers' reflective journals, which were mentioned in their class. In addition to being a subject, English was also an important auxiliary tool for many subjects and one of the future employment requirements for many professional fields. Therefore, many teachers believed that understanding the differences between Chinese and Western cultures would be more helpful in learning English (T1&T2). Teachers paid more attention to cultural integration and conflict and believed culture and language were closely related (T3).

QUANTITATIVE DATA FINDINGS

This section presents the survey results on teachers' reflective practices for RQ2, focusing on their perceptions of reflection in professional development and their engagement in reflective activities.

Teachers' Perceptions of Reflection in Professional Development

Survey results indicated that teachers overwhelmingly recognized reflection as an integral component of TPD. Table 4 demonstrates the impact of reflection on teacher professional development. All participants acknowledged the importance of reflection for professional development, though some provided only general statements. The most frequently mentioned benefit was professional or self-growth (71.8%). In addition, 27.6% of teachers believed that reflection improved teaching quality, while 16.5% linked it to enhancing teaching approaches and methods. Overall, reflection was widely recognized as a critical component of teachers' continuous improvement.

Table 4
Multiple response of the role reflection plays in professional development

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	(N=170)
The Role Reflection Plays in Professional Development	Professional/self-development	122	48.8%	71.8%
	Teaching quality	47	18.8%	27.6%
	Approaches and methods	28	11.2%	16.5%
	Teacher quality	18	7.2%	10.6%
	Improving student learning	16	6.4%	9.4%
	Problem-solving	14	5.6%	8.2%
	Lesson content	5	2.0%	2.9%

Teachers' Reflective Practices

This part presented teachers' engagement in reflective practices, including when they reflected and what strategies they adopted to support their professional development.

Reflection Timeline

Survey responses revealed that 94.5% of teachers engaged in after-lesson reflection, while 51.6% reflected during lessons and 40.7% reflected before lessons. This indicated that most teachers preferred retrospective reflection, aligning with a reflective cycle that informs future instructional improvement. Additionally, a small subset of teachers reported engaging in reflection at all three time points, suggesting a subset of educators who adopt a continuous reflective approach.

Reflective Instruments and Strategies

Teachers reported using various tools to facilitate reflection. The most frequently used tools were classroom observation (63.4%), student feedback (55.4%), and reflective journals (44.0%), while video and audio recordings are the least commonly used (8.6%) (Table 5). These tools served as mechanisms for self-assessment and continuous professional learning.

Table 5
Multiple Response of Reflective Instruments

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	(N=175)
Reflective Instruments	Classroom observation	111	27.1%	63.4%
	Students' feedback	97	23.7%	55.4%
	Reflective journal	77	18.8%	44.0%
	Lesson plan / Teaching report	59	14.4%	33.7%
	Peer coaching	50	12.2%	28.6%
	Video & audio recording	15	3.7%	8.6%

Regarding reflective strategies (Table 6), most teachers engaged in individual reflection (77.2%), followed by partner reflection (49.4%) and small-group reflection (40.7%). School-wide reflection was the least common (6.2%), indicating that most teachers reflect either alone or within small collaborative settings rather than institutionally. These strategies shaped teachers' ongoing professional development by fostering self-improvement and peer learning.

Table 6
Multiple Response of Reflective Strategies

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	(N=162)
Reflective Strategies	Individual Reflective Practice	125	44.5%	77.2%
	Partner Reflective Practice	80	28.5%	49.4%
	Small Group Reflective (Practice Teaching and research activity)	66	23.5%	40.7%
	School-Wide Reflective Practice	10	3.6%	6.2%
Total		281	100.0%	173.5%

DISCUSSION

This study adopted a mixed research method to investigate the focusing areas of in-service English teachers' reflective practice in Chinese higher education and the

influence of reflective practice on TPD. The following discussion presents the findings within the contexts of the existing literature.

Evaluating Teaching

Among the reflective themes identified, evaluating teaching emerged as the most prominent area in in-service teachers' journals. Teachers often began their reflective journey by analysing the successes and challenges of their classroom experience (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). This aligns with survey results showing that classroom observation (63.4%) and student feedback (55.4%) were the most frequently utilized, suggesting that teachers actively rely on direct classroom interactions and student responses to assess the effectiveness of their instructional strategies.

Teachers frequently discussed students' problems and classroom interactions in journals. These reflections reinforced the view that they used reflection to refine their instructional approaches. As Dumlao and Pinatacan (2019) point out, reflective journaling supports the development of teachers' critical thinking, which enables them to evaluate their teaching more analytically and improve their instructional strategies accordingly. Rather than simply applying classroom routines and strategies automatically, the experienced teachers demonstrated a series of systematic and conscious reflections, displaying a combination of descriptive and critical reflection (Ho & Richards, 1993). For instance, reflections on classroom interaction required analysis of the disconnect between strategies and student participation, embodying critical reflection. As Brookfield (2017) emphasises, such practices deepen understanding of classroom dynamics and student needs. Similarly, Schön's (1983) concept of the reflective cycle—where past experiences inform future action—was evident in teachers' iterative adjustments.

In addition, peer reflection and collective reflection were also involved in teacher evaluation. They mainly emphasised mutual communication and learning among teachers as well as constructive suggestions, rather than mutual evaluation. Some teachers described peer discussion and collaborative reflection as opportunities to overcome cognitive limitations and promote innovation, ultimately contributing to its development and improvement (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Farrell, 2015; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2016; Godínez Martínez, 2018). Through collaborative teacher reflective practice, teachers can deepen their reflection, better understand their reflective process (Korthagen & Nuijten, 2022), change their knowledge and attitudes, understand and rebuild their teaching knowledge (Godínez Martínez, 2018), enhance classroom management capabilities, and contribute to their professional development (Gutierez & Kim, 2017). However, while 77.2% of teachers reported individual reflection, only 49.4% engaged in peer reflection, and a mere 6.2% participated in school-wide reflection. This discrepancy between individual and peer reflection reported in the survey also echoed the journal entries, which emphasised limited opportunities for collaborative professional dialogues. It indicates a limited systemic support for collaborative reflection, despite its widely acknowledged benefits. Yet, as Godínez Martínez (2018) argues, teacher collaboration needs to be based on the appropriate

conditions required for reflective practice, such as opportunities, time, and help from others—factors often needed to be improved in the participants' schools.

Approaches and Methods

The theme of approaches and methods was the second most prominent focus in the teachers' reflective journals, including five sub-themes: teachers' knowledge, learners, approaches and methods in teaching, the content of a lesson, and the school context. These reflections showed that teachers emphasised student-centeredness, adaptability, and the integration of technology into teaching practice.

An examination of approaches and methods emphasises the essential function they play in teachers' reflective practice. Teachers frequently concentrated on teaching strategies and teacher knowledge, particularly PCK and TPACK, highlighting the essential function of pedagogical knowledge in effective instruction. Mishra and Koehler (2006) highlight the significance of TPACK in contemporary classrooms. TPACK has significantly influenced the implementation of teaching in modern educational environments, allowing educators to proficiently integrate technology tools to improve student learning (Willermark, 2018), and it relates to the combination of technology and pedagogy (Guggemos & Seufert, 2021). In this research, teachers reflected on how their teaching methods impacted student engagement and learning outcomes. Reflective practice enables teachers to improve their methods to better meet the needs of learners (Farrell, 2018). This focus was consistent with the literature that emphasises the importance of reflective teaching in connecting theory and practice (Farrell, 2018). The emphasis on adaptation and coordination demonstrated a more comprehensive view of teaching as a dynamic process that necessitates constant re-evaluation of teaching methods considering classroom conditions.

Interestingly, teachers reflected less on the wider school context, suggesting that teachers primarily situated their reflective practice within the immediate classroom context. These findings parallel that of Loughran (2002), who noted that while teachers excel at analysing classroom-level problems, broader systemic factors tend to receive less attention in reflection. Encouraging teachers to engage in situated reflection could improve their ability to respond to challenges at both micro and macro levels. In summary, the theme of approaches and methods illustrates teachers' commitment to improving their teaching by critically engaging with instructional strategies, technology, and learner needs.

Theories of Teaching

In theories of teaching, teachers explored their theories and beliefs about teaching and learning. They applied theory to classroom practice and resolved contradictions between theory and practice. Survey results indirectly support this theme, as 71.8% teachers reported that they viewed reflection as crucial for professional or self-development, while some teachers linked it directly to improving teaching quality (27.6%) and teacher quality (10.6%). This suggests that teachers recognize reflection as a key process for integrating theory with practice, ensuring continuous professional learning. Reflective thinking connects beliefs to practice, allowing teachers to critically

evaluate and improve their strategies (Dewey, 1933). It also promotes responsive teaching by allowing teachers to evaluate the effectiveness of their methods and make necessary adjustments (Rodgers, 2002; Bawaneh et al., 2020). A notable feature of teachers' reflections was attention to emotional factors. Teachers often emphasised the importance of creating a harmonious and supportive classroom atmosphere, recognizing its impact on student learning outcomes and values. Reflective teaching promotes the integration of practice with the emotional and cognitive dimensions of teaching, ensuring that teachers meet the diverse needs of the classroom (Zeichner & Liston, 2013). Meanwhile, positive emotion directly affects teachers' teaching behaviours, which is the key factor of education quality as well as students' classroom engagement and learning outcomes, highlighting the importance of maintaining a positive teacher-student relationship and classroom atmosphere (Frenzel et al., 2021). Brookfield (2017) also emphasised the role of emotional engagement in fostering trust and meeting students' emotional needs, which can enhance the learning experience. Teachers' emotional awareness in reflective practice can foster resilience and a deeper engagement with theory and classroom realities (Richards, 2022). Teachers also adjusted their theoretical frameworks and modified their strategies in response to classroom observations (63.4%) and students' feedback (55.4%). These journal insights are complemented by survey data, which further confirm that reflection is an essential process through which teachers integrate theory into their daily teaching. As Zeicher & Liston (2013) assert, the ability to reconcile theory with classroom realities is essential for effective teaching. Openness to theory in reflective practice can increase teachers' adaptability and self-efficacy, encouraging them to be innovative in teaching (Hascher & Hagenauer, 2016). Furthermore, teachers' experiences and reflections often reshape their understanding of teaching theory, and they can reevaluate and improve their teaching methods by adjusting to manage unexpected classroom dynamics and challenges.

Self-Awareness

In terms of self-awareness, the teachers acknowledged that reflective practices promoted self-improvement and professional competence, enabling them to identify strengths and weaknesses and engage in lifelong learning. Survey results reinforced this finding. More than two thirds of the teachers (71.8%) considered reflection essential for professional growth, highlighting its role in fostering self-awareness and continuous improvement. The mutual reinforcement between reflective journals and survey responses strengthens the significance of reflection in cultivating self-awareness, personal goals, and long-term growth. Such practices enabled teachers to critically assess their own teaching styles, language proficiency, and instructional identity. These insights helped them understand how personal characteristics shaped their classroom performance. Teacher identity is dynamic and continuously developing, which is an important component of professional development (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Garner & Kaplan, 2019; Rushton et al., 2023), yet teachers' journals lacked in-depth reflection on this aspect. Open-ended responses in the survey affirmed the positive impact of reflective practice on TPD, claiming that reflection helped to continuously learn and update teaching methods and promote peer cooperation, thereby promoting self-improvement and improving teaching effectiveness (Korthagen & Nuijten, 2022).

These insights were often linked to individualized efforts at professional improvement. The teachers often linked their personal goals to their teaching practices or to their career aspirations, which aligns with survey findings indicating the role of self-directed reflection in shaping long-term professional development trajectories. In China, due to factors such as highly competitive pressure, promotion needs, and the continuous increase of college students' professional requirements, the demand for TPD of in-service teachers in higher education has gradually increased (Fan & Yang, 2015; Zhang & Long, 2021). Moghaddam et al. (2020) similarly noted that goal-oriented reflection fosters long-term growth. The goal-oriented reflection can enhance teachers' adaptability and self-efficacy (Hascher & Hagenauer, 2016). However, some teachers had also expressed confusion about the challenges in balancing teaching objectives with student needs, as well as their personal goals with professional pressure. Richards (2022) argues that reflection can help teachers deal with such challenges.

Cross-Cultural Communication

Teachers' reflections on intercultural communication primarily focused on the issues of cultural integration and conflict, as well as the significance of cultural language in language learning, indicating their awareness of the sociocultural dynamics that influence teaching and learning. Reflective teaching involves placing teaching practices in a broader cultural and social context (Zeichner & Liston, 2013). Intercultural English teaching offers the development of English language proficiency and multicultural competencies through critical and reflective thinking, thereby enabling learners to make more informed decisions in their lives (Corbett, 2022). Understanding and addressing cultural differences in the classroom is essential for promoting equity and student engagement (Banks & Banks, 2019). However, teachers' reflection on culture is relatively limited and superficial and does not involve deeper aspects such as promoting equality. Despite the increasing importance of culture and the further emphasis on the integration of Chinese and Western cultures in English teaching reforms, there is still little consideration of the broader sociocultural or policy aspects in teachers' reflections.

CONCLUSION

This research explored the reflective practices of in-service English teachers in Chinese higher education by analysing their reflective journals and responses to open-ended survey questions. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data reinforces the reliability and interpretive depth of the findings. Teachers' reflective journals recorded rich, individual perspectives, while survey data confirmed recurring themes across participants. The findings revealed that teachers primarily focused on evaluating teaching, their teaching approaches and methods, teaching theories, self-awareness, and cross-cultural communication. These reflections not only reflected individual teaching experiences but also demonstrated teachers' efforts to integrate personal beliefs, pedagogical knowledge, and contextual factors into classroom practice. Survey data complemented the journal analysis by confirming the perceived value of reflection in TPD. Teachers identified its role in improving instructional quality, self-growth, and teaching strategies. While individual reflection was most common, collaborative and peer reflections were also prevalent, suggesting the significance of both individual and

collaborative reflection. But institutional structures for collective reflection still need to be improved. Overall, this paper underscores the importance of reflective practice as a meaningful tool for teachers' ongoing professional growth. It highlights the need for sustained support, both individually and institutionally, to foster critical and constructive reflection that can improve the quality of education and promote teacher professional development.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While this investigation offers valuable insights into reflective practices of in-service English teachers in Chinese higher education, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size for reflective journal writing was relatively small (six experienced teachers), and although purposively selected for their experience, the findings may not fully represent the broader population of tertiary English teachers in China. Future research should consider expanding the sample to include teachers from more diverse institutional backgrounds and professional levels. Besides, the study relied on self-reported data through journals and open-ended survey responses. While these sources offer rich qualitative insights, they may also be influenced by social desirability or selective recall. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to incorporate classroom observations, interviews, or longitudinal tracking to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how reflective practices evolve over time and affect teaching behaviours. Despite these limitations, this work affirms the essential role of reflective practice in TPD and recommends that colleges and universities create more structured opportunities for collaborative reflection, professional discussions, and sustained pedagogical support for in-service teachers. Moreover, the findings may also assist local universities and policymakers in understanding in-service teachers' reflective levels and their value in TPD. In turn, the data can serve as an empirical basis for developing more targeted and equitable teacher development policies in Chinese higher education.

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