



From reflection to practice: How reflective journaling shapes the teaching methods and strategies of novice EFL teachers

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the self-reported experiences and perceived contribution of reflective journaling on the teaching strategies of novice English as a Foreign Language (EFL). While the benefits of reflective practice have been widely acknowledged, its specific effects on the language-specific pedagogical skills of early-career educators are underexplored. This small-scale exploratory study involved three novice EFL teachers who produced weekly reflective journal entries for six weeks. Entries were guided by a framework focusing on eight pedagogical components and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings suggest that reflective journaling may serve as a supportive tool for professional growth. Participants reported a gradual shift from teacher-centered instruction toward more dynamic, student-centered teaching strategies. This included developing a greater diversity in teaching activities, ensuring purposeful curriculum alignment, and employing more sophisticated problem-solving and communication approaches. The study concludes that reflective journaling shows potential as a valuable tool for the professional development of novice language teachers, encouraging them to critically evaluate their practice and make targeted improvements to their communicative teaching strategies. These findings have relevant implications for TESOL teacher education and induction programs.

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Introduction

Professional development is demonstrably crucial for enhancing the quality of education (Maksimović & Osmanović, 2018). The existing literature related to teacher training extensively documents the typical developmental stages of a teacher's career, noting that educators exhibit varied attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviors across different career phases (Day, 2004; Fullan, 2016; Huberman, 1989). While attention is warranted for all career phases, the novice stage is particularly significant because it is linked to stress and uncertainty (Kocabaş & Deniz, 2023).

Numerous educational studies have examined the concept of novice teachers, defining them not only by their limited years of service but also by a distinct set of professional challenges. In terms of experience, researchers such as Sezer (2017), Ngang and Chan (2015) and Harmsen et al. (2018) define novice teachers as individuals with up to three years of service. On the other hand, Kim and Roth (2011) adopt a broader view, encompassing teachers with fewer than five years in the classroom. Collectively, these studies suggest that educators with five or fewer years of teaching experience are considered inexperienced.

As novice teachers enter the profession, they often encounter numerous academic challenges (Abdurrahman, 2016). For novice EFL teachers, these challenges are often compounded by the dual demand of managing a classroom while simultaneously facilitating second language acquisition (Tran, 2021). Lacking experience and facing considerable pressure, novice language teachers often struggle to manage challenging situations (Abdurrahman, 2016; Karaman, 2013) or engage learners from diverse backgrounds, who may display disruptive behaviors intensified by uninspiring teaching methods or language anxiety (Ayers, 2019; Taylor et al., 2007). Evidence from Vietnam supports these concerns, as novice EFL teachers often experience difficulties maintaining student engagement and managing classroom behaviours that may disrupt learning and reduce instructional effectiveness (Nguyen & Tran, 2024). To address these challenges, many novice teachers tend to adopt teacher-centred classroom management practices as a tendency might be reinforced by the continued prevalence of teacher-centred pedagogical traditions (Pham Thi, 2025). Another significant hurdle is the need for a variety of meaningful, curriculum-aligned language activities, which is frequently complicated by gaps between their pre-service TESOL training and the practical pedagogical strategies they encounter in the classroom (Klassen & Chiu, 2011). Similar challenges have also been identified among novice EFL teachers, who must navigate challenges related to instructional practice, learner diversity, student motivation, and institutional demands during their early years of teaching (Tran, 2021). This is often compounded by a lack of awareness regarding individual student differences in language proficiency (Ameen et al., 2024) and a lack of mentorship (Shanks et al., 2022). This limited professional interaction may create difficulties for new EFL teachers (Stevenson, 2018) as they receive little support from experienced colleagues who could provide valuable and practical insights on language-specific teaching methods, including effective concept-checking, encouraging communicative problem-solving, clear target-language communication, and active responsiveness.

While the complex challenges facing novice EFL teachers are well-documented across international contexts, limited attention has been given to how early-career educators can systematically learn from these experiences to improve their instructional practices. Fostering reflective practices that encourage teachers to learn from their classroom experiences has emerged as a vital global strategy to help novice teachers address these widespread professional challenges and adapt more effectively to their roles (Lefebvre et al., 2022). Therefore, this research seeks to explore the perceived role of reflective journaling, as a structured form of reflective practice, in the development of teaching skills of novice teachers, particularly regarding their teaching methods and strategies. The guiding research question is: *How do novice EFL teachers perceive the influence of reflective journaling on their teaching methods and strategies?*

Teaching methods and strategies

Effective teaching methods and strategies can be understood through eight interconnected dimensions, which together form a comprehensive evaluation framework. This framework was proposed from the work of Cohen et al. (2010) and demonstrated in Figure 1. The first dimension, *Diversity in Teaching Activities*, requires educators to design varied activities tailored to different learning preferences to enhance comprehension (Tomlinson, 2014). Closely linked is *Curriculum Alignment*, which ensures that teaching practices are aligned with established learning outcomes and content standards (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The third component, *Purposeful Practical Activities*, focuses on designing tasks that allow learners to apply acquired knowledge in meaningful and goal-oriented ways (Mayer & Moreno, 2003). Complementing this is *Student Involvement* which refers to the active engagement of learners through interactive and participatory approaches that foster sustained attention and motivation (Reschly & Christenson, 2022). Furthermore, effective pedagogy relies on skilful *Questioning Techniques*, where effective teachers use varied types of questions to assess understanding, promote critical thinking, and encourage discussion (Salmon & Barrera, 2021).

In EFL classrooms, this involves the strategic use of CCQs and ICQs to assess learners' comprehension without relying on first-language (L1) translation. *Problem-Solving Encouragement* is another vital dimension, motivating students to explore different approaches and develop perseverance when facing challenges (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). Equally essential is *Clarity in Communication*, involving well-structured explanations in language that is appropriate for learners' proficiency levels, supported by instructional aids such as visual aid (Coe et al., 2014). For novice teachers, this often entails managing Teacher Talking Time (TTT), making informed decisions about when to use the target language (L2) and when limited L1 support may enhance understanding. Finally, *Active Listening and Responsiveness* highlights the teachers' ability to attentively observe student cues and respond thoughtfully to their inquiries and contributions, hereby fostering a supportive and adaptive classroom environment (Hamre et al., 2013).

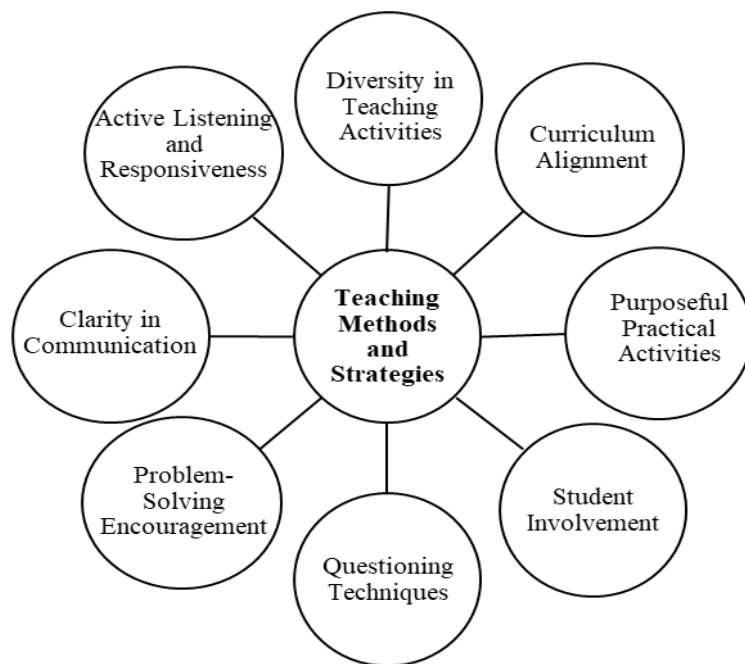


Figure 1. Components of teaching methods and strategies (Cohen et al., 2010).

Reflective journaling

Reflection is widely regarded as a process through which individuals examine their experiences and existing knowledge to inform future actions and professional growth (Moon, 2013; Whittaker & van Garderen, 2009). While various reflective methods exist, written reflection, particularly in the form of reflective journals, is recognized as a valuable tool for self-reflection and processing experiences (Lew & Schmidt, 2011). For teachers, reflective journaling provides a personal space to examine their beliefs and practices, develop a deeper understanding of their teaching, and challenge unproductive habits (Farrell, 2013; Maksimović & Osmanović, 2018). In the context of language education, Farrell (2015) emphasizes that reflection-on-action through writing enables teachers to better understand the complex linguistic demands of their lessons and to consider how their pedagogical beliefs align with their actual classroom practices.

To guide this reflective process in a systematic and purposeful way, this study adopted the framework developed by Rolfe et al. (2001). This model is noted by Jasper (2003) as particularly effective for supporting novice practitioners and inexperienced teachers. It provides a clear structure through three key guiding questions: What?, So What?, Now What?. The first, "What?", is descriptive, prompting teachers to observe the details of an event, their own feelings, and the effects on student learning. The second, "So what?", is analytical, requiring them to interpret the meaning and implications of the experience. The final stage, "Now what?", is action-oriented, guiding participants to develop practical steps for future improvement based on their new understanding.

Previous research on reflective journaling on teaching practice

Several studies have shown the importance of reflective journaling in fostering professional growth among educators, with the habit of keeping a teaching diary consistently linked to improvements in teaching quality. Globally, this practice is recognized for enhancing teaching methods and strategies. For instance, a qualitative study by Zulfikar and Mujiburrahman (2017) highlighted that reflective journals encourage teachers to self-assess their teaching techniques and procedures. Similarly, Kurniati et al. (2023) discovered a substantial correlation between reflective journaling and improved teaching quality, noting that the practice fosters critical analysis of lesson strengths and weaknesses, prompting educators to use more innovative and engaging ways. Within the Vietnamese educational context, local research offers valuable insights. A study by Nha and Quynh (2024) with primary school English teachers in Vietnam observed that journaling was a critical tool that facilitated deeper reflection on the selection of teaching methods, the design of activities, and the choice of materials.

Although the benefits of reflective practice are widely acknowledged (Kurniati et al., 2023; Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2017), a closer examination of the literature reveals two notable research gaps. First, much of the existing literature has focused on the general perceptions and attitudes of pre-service teachers towards reflective journaling. In contrast, there is relatively limited research that specifically examines the impact of reflective journaling on novice teachers, who have completed their initial training and are in the early, formative years of their professional practice. Second, while foundational research (Widiastari & Fithriani, 2024) and the local studies already cited affirm that journaling motivates reflection, the particular impacts of this activity on the development of a specific set of teaching strategies remain largely underexplored. The existing research often provides a general perspective on what teachers reflect on (e.g., methods, materials) rather than a detailed investigation of how specific pedagogical skills evolve through sustained journaling.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the effects of reflective journaling by focusing specifically on the novice teacher cohort and conducting a focused investigation into eight specific aspects of their teaching methods and strategies.

Methodology

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative approach as reflective journal entries were analyzed to explore the nuanced processes of professional growth, trace individual developmental trajectories, and examine how reflection informs and shapes pedagogical practices.

Participants and procedures

This study employed a purposive sampling method to select participants. The criteria required participants to be novice teachers with less than five years of professional experience and graduates. Initially, six novice EFL teachers from various centers in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, voluntarily agreed to participate.

Prior to the study's commencement, all potential participants were fully informed of the research's aims, the data collection process, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. The research team then conducted an online briefing session to introduce the structure of the journal template and explain the principles of reflective journaling, as this was a new practice for all attendees. This session also provided an opportunity for participants to seek clarification on any aspect of the study before formally committing.

Following the briefing, three participants withdrew due to personal reasons. The final study sample thus consisted of three novice EFL teachers. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were coded as in Table 1 to anonymize their data. The data collection procedure involved these participants voluntarily writing and submitting weekly reflective journal entries over six weeks.

Each participant was asked to select one of their classes as the primary focus for the six-week study. They then delivered lessons using their preferred teaching methods and strategies. To facilitate and support their reflections, structured and visually engaging journal templates were created using Google Sheets. These templates were organized around the study's eight main components and included specific guiding questions for each theme. The template was distributed weekly, and participants completed it following each lesson. In their entries, they documented observations, reflected on their instructional decisions, and noted any perceived challenges or changes related to the eight components.

Table 1. Participants' information.

Participants	Code	Years of teaching experience
Teacher 1	T1	1
Teacher 2	T2	3
Teacher 3	T3	2

Research Context

The research was conducted within English language centers outside the formal education system in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. This kind of non-formal educational institution offers additional language instruction, whose lessons normally take place in the evenings and on

weekends. In such an institution, teachers are usually expected to work according to a rigid curriculum that is provided by the centers and which uses prescribed textbooks and presentation slides. Besides, in these centers there is a high institutional focus on motivating students; therefore, teachers are expected to use a lot of interactive games and dynamic activities to motivate the students. This institutional demand for high-energy, communicative activities often creates a sharp contrast with the deeply ingrained, traditional teacher-centered pedagogical norms prevalent in the formal Vietnamese schooling system. This dichotomy adds an additional layer of complexity for novice educators trying to reconcile their cultural educational background with their current professional expectations. The novice teachers, in particular, have to manage classrooms where there are different levels of students' proficiencies, varying student characters (from very energetic to very introverted), and rapid pacing. It is within this particular working framework that the three teachers (who had one to three years of teaching experience) worked for six weeks.

Data collection and analysis

At the start of each week, participants received a visually structured journal template via Google Sheets, including guiding questions aligned with the eight thematic components. After delivering their lessons, the teachers completed their journal entries by reflecting on classroom events, student reactions, their instructional decisions, and any perceived changes or challenges. The format allowed teachers to observe developments in their teaching over time and make informed adjustments in subsequent lessons. Throughout the six-week intervention, participants retained access to their previous entries, allowing them to revisit earlier reflections and track their evolving practices.

Following the journaling period, a total of 18 journal entries (six per participant) were compiled for review. The data were analyzed using a hybrid deductive-inductive thematic analysis. This process was conducted independently by two researchers to enhance analytical rigor and inter-rater reliability.

In the initial deductive phase, the eight pre-existing components of teaching methods and strategies served as an a priori analytical framework. The researchers closely read the journal entries and applied first-level codes to categorize the raw data into these eight broad, predetermined categories (e.g., Diversity in Teaching Activities, Curriculum Alignment).

Subsequently, an inductive analysis was done on the data gathered for each of the eight broad categories. In this phase, the researchers conducted a line-by-line coding procedure to generate secondary sub-themes that captured subtleties in changes, instructional adjustments, and consistency in the subjects' practices. Much effort was made during this process to identify indications of development, adjustment, and reflection among the subjects over the six weeks of data collection. The two researchers then met to compare their independently generated codes; any discrepancies in code assignment or theme generation were resolved through collaborative discussion until a final consensus on the coding framework was achieved.

To ensure transparency in how raw journal excerpts were refined into overarching themes, Table 2 provides illustrative examples of the hybrid coding process.

Table 2. Illustrative examples of the hybrid deductive-inductive coding process.

Raw Data Excerpt (Journal Entry)	Deductive (Phase 1)	Category	Inductive (Phase 2)	Sub-Theme
"Instead of just reading and answering, I had them do 'Chart Charades' to practice the target vocabulary. The energy in the room completely changed, and they remembered the words much better."	Diversity in Teaching Activities		Expansion of activity repertoire (shift from rigid exercises to interactive games).	
"Usually, when they struggle with reading comprehension, I just point to the paragraph where the answer is. Today, I used a think-aloud strategy and had them work in groups to analyze why certain answers were incorrect."	Problem-Solving Encouragement		Transition from teacher-led instruction to fostering student independence and analytical skills.	
"I had my lesson from last week. Today, I cut my instructions down to three short steps, modeled the activity with a strong student, and asked two ICQs. Everyone knew exactly what to do immediately."	Clarity in Communication		Increased awareness of communication barriers and application of targeted support strategies (modeling, ICQs).	

Findings

The thematic analysis of novice teachers' reflective journaling reveals a multifaceted evolution in their self-reported teaching strategies and methods, organized under eight major codes.

Diversity in teaching activities

Initially, teaching activities often centred around specific, rigid methods, such as the 4-step reading strategy (T1), controlled writing (T2), or standard techniques like basic games. Some

teachers acknowledged this lack of variety, noting that it impacted engagement. As T2 reflected in Week 1: "The students seemed a bit bored today. I relied too much on the textbook's controlled writing exercises, and they expect more interactive activities." During the intervention, all teachers demonstrated a consistent expansion of their activity repertoire. New activities introduced included various games, such as "Chart Charades" (T1), board races (T3), and Bamboozle (T3), along with skill-specific exercises. Teachers' reflections showed increased consideration of activity effectiveness, prompting adjustments. For example, T1 noted in Week 4: "Instead of just reading and answering, I had them do 'Chart Charades' to practice the target vocabulary. The energy in the room completely changed, and they remembered the words much better."

Throughout the intervention, teachers consistently introduced a wider variety of activities across different language skills (T1, T2, T3). Their reflections showed greater consideration of activity effectiveness and student responses, leading to instructional adjustments (T2, T3). Planning also became more specific, targeting particular skills and learner needs (T1, T3).

Curriculum alignment

To ensure the quality of the curriculum, teachers initially focused heavily on covering scheduled topics. T3 noted in an early entry: "I just followed the center's slides today without checking if they actually grasped the previous unit's vocabulary. I assumed they knew it. Through the reflection period, they gradually acknowledged potential gaps in uniform understanding or heavy reliance on provided materials.

Overtime, while adhering to lesson plans and objectives, teachers moved beyond mere coverage towards ensuring deeper understanding. They began identifying specific gaps more precisely, such as varied proficiency levels (T1) and phonics pronunciation issues (T3). Consequently, planned adjustments became more concrete. As T3 reflected later in the study: "I realized during the speaking task that many students were mispronouncing the 'th' sound. I decided to pause the planned lesson to create a quick supplementary phonics game, which helped tremendously before we moved on."

The shift from focusing solely on coverage to refining content delivery for better comprehension and alignment marked significant improvement (T1). Over time, the identification of gaps became more specific (T2, T3), leading to more targeted and actionable plans for adaptation and supplementation (T1, T2, T3). Teachers demonstrated increased proactivity in adapting or creating materials rather than relying solely on provided resources (T3).

Purposeful practical activities

Initially, activities often involved standard sequential exercises (T1) or basic vocabulary reviews (T2), and assessment was typically conducted through simple observation. Over the course of the intervention, teachers increasingly implemented practical activities that were

explicitly linked to specific learning objectives. These activities also became more complex, incorporating approaches such as flipped learning (T1) and mini-debates (T1).

This shift was reflected in the increasing complexity of tasks. Activities gradually moved from routine practice to more engaging and cognitively demanding formats in order to directly supports targeted learning outcomes. For example, T1 reflected: "I wanted them to practice persuasive speaking, so rather than just doing a role-play, I organized a mini-debate. It was much more purposeful because they had to actively use the target grammar to defend their points."

Teachers consistently documented the use of learning activities aligned with learning goals throughout the intervention (T1, T2, T3). Their repertoire gradually expanded beyond routine practice to include more interactive and skill-integrated tasks (T1, T2, T3). Planning also became increasingly purposeful, incorporating activities such as mini-debates (T1) and obstacle courses (T3).

Student involvement

Teachers began with varied approaches to enhance student involvement, often expressing uncertainty about achieving universal participation. T3 reported low initial engagement, noting: "Only about 60% of the class was paying attention today. The quieter students just hid in the back." Gradually, a clear progression towards more dynamic and targeted strategies was observed. Teachers increasingly incorporated techniques such as "Think-Pair-Share" (T1), scaffolding (T2), and Total Physical Response (TPR) (T3). A significant development was the growing awareness of individual student needs, particularly in addressing shy or introverted students. T1 documented this shift: "I noticed Student A never raises his hand. Today, I strategically paired him with a stronger, very supportive student for the task. He ended up speaking the most he has all term."

Progress was evident in several areas. Teachers reported increased confidence in student participation (T1), while their reflections highlighted the positive impact of implemented strategies, such as scaffolding that boosted engagement (T2). Additionally, the successful application of previously planned actions, including role-play (T1, T3), and the development of more targeted future plans, such as strategic grouping and interactive group activities (T2, T3), were noted. By Week 5, one teacher rated their satisfaction with student involvement as 5/5 (T2).

Questioning techniques

In the early stages of the intervention, common questioning techniques were limited to factual recall, clarification, and simple concept-checking questions (CCQs). Participants expressed uncertainty regarding how to foster higher-order thinking (T1). Through reflective practice, teachers become increasingly aware of this gap. As T2 reflected: "I reflected on my day of

teaching and realized I only asked 'yes/no' questions or questions where the answer was directly in the text. I wasn't making them think."

Teachers progressively diversified their questioning strategies, exploring "why" questions (T1, T3), application questions linked to real-life scenarios (T2), and inferential questions. The focus on refining question delivery also grew, incorporating strategies such as providing adequate wait time. T2 noted in Week 5: "Today, I made a conscious effort to ask an evaluative question and then just wait. The silence was awkward for three seconds, but then three different students offered really thoughtful, complex answers."

Improvement is evident in the documented expansion of question types used (T1, T2, T3) and the explicit planning for questions aimed at deeper or critical thinking (T1, T3). Increased sophistication was noted in the attention paid to delivery techniques by Week 5/6 (T2, T3). Future plans, such as having students generate questions (T2), also indicate development.

Problem-solving encouragement

At the beginning of the intervention, approaches varied; one teacher explicitly taught tips (T1), while another used guiding questions (T3). Early observations noted limited engagement during these tasks. As their practices evolved, teachers began to adopt more student-centered problem-solving strategies, such as think-alouds, error analysis, and open-ended challenges.

There was a clear shift from teacher-led instruction towards fostering student independence. T1 reflected on this transition: "Usually, when they struggle with reading comprehension, I just point to the paragraph where the answer is. Today, I used a think-aloud strategy and had them work in groups to analyze why certain answers were incorrect. They were much more engaged in the process."

Teachers reported increasing student engagement and willingness to participate in problem-solving activities throughout the intervention (T1, T2, T3). There was a clear shift from teacher-led instruction towards strategies that fostered student independence and creativity, exemplified by the use of error analysis (T1, T2) and real-life scenarios (T3). Future planning reflected this shift, with teachers proposing more targeted pedagogical approaches, including collaborative learning design (T2) and the integration of Project-Based Learning (T3).

Clarity in communication

Teachers initially employed various methods for communication, such as bilingual instructions (T1). Despite these efforts, some recognized gaps between perceived understanding and actual performance. T3 noted: "I gave the instructions for the game, but when I said 'go', half the class just stared at me. My explanation was way too long and confusing."

As practice progressed, teachers developed greater awareness of communication barriers. In response, they utilized a wider range of communication support, including visual aids (T1, T3), modeling, and consistent use of instruction-checking questions (ICQs). T3 later wrote: "I

learned my lesson from last week. Today, I cut my instructions down to three short steps, modeled the activity with a strong student, and asked two ICQs. Everyone knew exactly what to do immediately."

Teachers' reflections indicated greater awareness of communication challenges (T1, T3), improved student adherence to instructions over time (T1, T3), and the continued implementation and refinement of feedback strategies (T1, T2, T3). By the later weeks, some teachers also expressed confidence in their communication practices (T3).

Active listening and responsiveness

Teachers initially employed techniques like paraphrasing and providing encouragement to respond to students. Nonetheless, some expressed uncertainty about whether all students truly felt heard. With continued reflection, teachers documented more concrete active listening skills, including maintaining eye contact and minimizing interruptions.

Responsiveness strategies were refined to include constructive feedback and specific praise. A notable improvement was the marked increase in teacher confidence regarding the positive impact of their listening. T2 reflected: "When a student gave a wrong answer today, instead of just moving to the next person, I really listened, smiled, and praised their effort before scaffolding them to the right answer. I could see their posture change; they didn't look defeated, and they volunteered again later in the lesson."

Improvement is demonstrated by the increased use and documentation of specific active listening behaviors (T1, T2, T3) and refined responsive strategies (T3). A notable improvement was the marked increase in teacher confidence regarding the positive impact of their listening and whether students felt heard, transitioning from uncertainty (T1, T2) to affirmation (T2, T3). Teachers explicitly linked their responsiveness to increased student engagement and a sense of safety in the classroom (T3).

Discussion

This study aimed to explore how novice teachers described and interpreted the role of structured reflective journaling on their teaching methods and strategies. The exploratory analysis of six weeks of journal entries revealed that structured reflective journaling functions as a practical framework for supporting early-career teachers, driving perceived improvements across all eight evaluated dimensions of EFL teaching. While participants initially exhibited limitations typical of novice language teachers, such as relying on rigid activities, factual recall questions, and coverage-focused curriculum alignment, they documented a steady shift toward more dynamic, student-centered practices over the intervention.

These reported pedagogical developments, including the expansion of interactive activities and the deliberate adoption of higher-order questioning and active listening, corresponded closely

with the structured nature of the reflective journaling process, which was guided by prompts grounded in Rolfe et al.'s (2001) reflective model. Rather than simply encouraging teachers to recall and critically examine their practices during the "What?" stage, the model provided a structure through which participants could analyse the implications of their observations in the "So what?" stage and consider practical strategies for subsequent lessons in the "Now what?" stage. This final stage appears to have offered participants an opportunity to translate perceived challenges into action plans. For instance, when a teacher identified a weakness, such as low student involvement or a reliance on simple recall questions, the journal framework prompted participants to move beyond merely identifying the issue. Instead, their reflections often progressed toward proposing a specific, self-directed responses (e.g., "I will try 'Think-Pair-Share'" or "I will plan two 'why' questions"), linking problem recognition with intentional planning for future action. The journal therefore functioned as more than a record of classroom experiences; the entries suggest that it also served as a structured space in which participants could work through instructional challenges and consider possible responses. This observation strongly aligns with previous literature indicating that journaling provides a vital personal space for educators to process experiences, examine their practices, and challenge unproductive habits (Farrell, 2013; Maksimović & Osmanović, 2018). This form of structured self-monitoring may be particularly valuable as a reflective support process for novice teachers, who often navigate complex classroom dynamics with limited prior experience. Indeed, Lefebvre et al. (2022) identify reflective practice as a crucial strategy for helping early-career teachers adapt to their roles and address professional challenges, while Jasper (2003) specifically highlights the effectiveness of structured models, such as the one adapted for this study, in supporting inexperienced practitioners.

The documented shift toward more dynamic, student-centered practices, specifically the adoption of open-ended problem-solving strategies and the deliberate use of interactive groupings, is particularly salient. While the system is undergoing reform, traditional pedagogy often remains teacher-centered, frequently relying on grammar-translation methods rather than communicative approaches (Pham Thi, 2025). That this structured reflective journaling accompanied such a shift is therefore noteworthy. It suggests that reflective practice may serve as a supportive, bottom-up tool to help novice teachers align their methods with modern, communicative pedagogical goals and address some of the constraints of highly traditional language classrooms. Furthermore, novice teachers often face a pronounced "theory-practice gap" (Thin, 2025) between the communicative theories learned in their university TESOL programs and the practical realities of their schools, and may lack the intensive, structured mentorship available in other systems (Shanks et al., 2022). The journaling process appears to function as a form of structured self-mentorship, providing participants with a framework to bridge this gap by systematically analyzing EFL-specific classroom challenges (e.g., adapting uniform textbooks for mixed-proficiency learners, student involvement in speaking tasks) and developing practical, autonomous solutions.

In addition, the specific pedagogical developments observed in this study broadly align with and extend the consensus that journaling fosters professional growth. Specifically, the teachers' demonstrated ability to self-assess and subsequently diversify their teaching activities and

refine their questioning techniques concurs with Zulfikar and Mujiburrahman (2017). Furthermore, the reported shift from rigid, textbook-reliant exercises toward more creative and purposeful practical activities echoes the findings of Kurniati et al. (2023). Similarly, the documented improvements in teachers' capacity to identify student comprehension gaps and adapt their curriculum delivery, demonstrating enhanced pedagogical reasoning and flexibility, are consistent with the conclusions of Bao et al. (2024). Finally, the overarching transition toward student-centered practices, such as incorporating think-aloud problem-solving strategies and scaffolding for individual learner needs, aligns with contemporary philosophies that prioritize learner agency (Woods & Copur-Gencturk, 2024) and differentiated instruction (Gaitas et al., 2024).

This study also offers a theoretical perspective on how structured reflective journaling may support novice teachers' pedagogical reasoning. Previous research has generally highlighted reflective journaling as a means of promoting professional reflection (Farrell, 2013; Lew & Schmidt, 2011; Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2017). The present findings, however, suggest that the structure of reflection itself deserves greater attention. Instead of functioning solely as a vehicle for retrospective reflection, the guided prompts adapted from Rolfe et al.'s (2001) reflective model appeared to support participants in linking classroom observations with subsequent pedagogical decisions. In other words, participants' reflections frequently progressed beyond identifying instructional challenges to considering possible responses and evaluating their suitability for future lessons. This extends existing discussions of reflective practice by suggesting that structured reflective journaling may serve as a scaffold for pedagogical reasoning. What it means is that the process helps teachers interpret classroom experiences, evaluate instructional options, and make informed teaching decisions. While further research involving classroom observations and larger samples is needed, the findings indicate that the degree of structure embedded within reflective activities may represent an important theoretical consideration when designing reflective practice for novice teachers.

This study, however, must be situated within several limitations. First, the results might be constrained by the small, homogenous sample. The study included only three participants, all of whom were novice EFL teachers in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Furthermore, the study experienced a 50% participant attrition rate before data collection, with three EFL educators withdrawing from participation. This is likely to result in selection bias, as the remaining participants could have differed from those who withdrew in their engagement with reflective journaling. Therefore, the findings may overrepresent positive experiences and should be interpreted with caution. Second, knowing that their reflections would be analyzed, participants may have been more likely to emphasize positive experiences and perceived improvements. Third, the use of structured prompts may have shaped participants' reflections by directing attention toward predefined themes, potentially limiting the emergence of more spontaneous insights. Finally, the study relied on verbal rather than written informed consent, which may be considered a limitation because written consent provides a clearer and more robust record of participant agreement.

These limitations, however, open avenues for future research. Longitudinal studies with larger, more diverse cohorts are crucial to validate these findings and track the long-term trajectory of pedagogical development associated with reflective journaling. Comparative investigations could examine the potential differences in outcomes of various reflective models or journaling structures on specific teaching skills. Integrating qualitative journal analysis with quantitative measures such as classroom observation scores or student achievement data, would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the effects. Future investigations might also explicitly incorporate all stages of Rolfe et al.'s model to explore deeper levels of reflection. Given the stress associated with the novice teaching phase, further attention should also be given to how reflective journaling relates to teacher well-being, self-efficacy, and retention is also warranted.

Conclusion

The implications of these preliminary findings are relevant for TESOL and language teacher education. They may also resonate with similar educational settings where novice EFL teachers face challenges in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and classroom practice. This exploratory research suggests that structured reflective journaling, focused on specific pedagogical themes, may serve as a helpful and practical tool for supporting novice language teachers as they reflect on and further develop their teaching skills and professional understanding. The self-reported data indicate that this practice may assist them in critically examining their classroom experiences, identifying areas they viewed as requiring further development such as refining CCQs or expanding communicative activities, and planning for future actions to address these instructional challenges. Importantly, the proposed framework offers flexibility for novice teachers. Instead of reflecting on all eight themes at once, they can focus on areas where they experience the most difficulty. This may make reflection a more targeted and manageable process of self-directed problem-solving. As the findings are derived from participants' reflections rather than independent classroom observations, they should be interpreted as evidence of teachers' perceived professional learning rather than direct evidence of changes in classroom practice. Future empirical research incorporating classroom observations, stimulated recall interviews, or other complementary data sources is therefore needed to examine whether these self-reported developments are reflected in teachers' classroom practices.

AI use declaration

This manuscript made use of Google Gemini to assist in paraphrasing, improving the clarity of text, synthesizing complex literature, providing an overview of a field and aiding with the analysis of qualitative data. No AI tools were used for the generation of research hypotheses

or the writing of conclusions. The final manuscript was authored and reviewed by the listed authors without additional AI input.

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