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ONLINE COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH IN AN EFL CONTEXT: THE EFFECT ON TEACHERS' REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Abstract. Technology can be integrated in teacher education and, hence, be used to empower teachers to extend learning beyond their classrooms. Therefore, the present study was an attempt to investigate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' perceptions of action research and explore the impact of their collaborative action research in an online discussion group on their reflective practice. In addition, we were interested to know how online collaborative research action research contributes to their promotion of reflective thinking. The participants of this study were 23 Iranian EFL teachers who were recruited based on convenience sampling. The design of the study was a pre-test post-test design. As such, two questionnaires were given to the participants at the beginning and end of the study. As the next step, the participants took part in online discussion groups for 10 sessions in which they read and watched some essays and videos, wrote about some topics, and shared their ideas and experiences. To consolidate the findings, semi-structured interviews were held with 12 participants. The result of the study indicated that most of the participants of the study had optimistic views regarding action research. In addition, participating in online discussion groups enabled them to think more about their teaching practice and gain higher levels of reflectivity. The results of the qualitative phase indicated that the online courses had effect on the teachers' practice and reflectivity in different ways. Despite all studies conducted on action research in Iran, contradictory results have been found regarding teachers' perception of action research. In addition, to the researchers' knowledge, no study has investigated the use of online collaborative action research on teachers' reflection. As such, it seemed necessary to conduct a study to explore the role of action research as a framework for improving reflective practice.

Keywords: action research; online collaborative action research; online discussion group; EFL teachers; reflective practice.

1. INTRODUCTION

The problem statement. While teaching, teachers may come up with some thought-provoking questions or encounter problems in their classrooms and try to find solutions to the problems in light of either their experiences or theories they have already studied. As such, they may need to get involved in small-scale research in their classrooms which is called action research. Action research consists of action and research in which the word 'action' refers to acting through systematic research, and the word 'research' refers to searching for a classroom problem [1]. As Kumaravadivelu [2, p.173] asserts, "the teacher is advised to do action research in the classroom by testing, interpreting, and judging the usefulness of professional theories proposed by experts". However, despite the benefits of action research, it seems that collaborative action research is more advantageous than individual research [3]. The term collaborative action research refers to teachers working together to investigate issues. Collaborative action research engages teachers to work in teams and provides them an

opportunity to reflect on their pedagogical practices. It is a way that keeps teachers up to date as they work together in the form of a group and enables them to have an active role in their learning [4]. Additionally, an online discussion group improves teachers' self-efficacy [5], problem solving, leadership skills, teaching skills [6], and professional development [4]. It is "a powerful tool for the development of critical thinking, collaboration, and reflection" [7, p.151]. An online discussion group functions as a platform for members to communicate with each other. Therefore, it can be assumed that using online discussion groups in EFL settings can contribute to teachers' sharing their knowledge and experiences [8]. Despite all studies conducted on action research in Iran, contradictory results have been found regarding teachers' perception of action research. On top of that, the bulk of the studies conducted on action research do not follow a sound methodology [9]. In addition, to the researchers' knowledge, no study has investigated the use of online discussion in doing action research. As such, based on the argument which postulates that action research enhances teachers' involvement in critical thinking and practice [10] and the assumption that it improves reflection [11] the present study employed an online discussion group as a way for EFL teachers' collaborative action research and investigated the effect of the collaboration on teachers' reflective practice and teachers' perceptions about action research.

Analysis of recent studies and publications. Various studies have explored the role of action research in academic contexts. Dehghan and Sahragard [12] investigated teachers' beliefs about action research and the effect of using action research in their classrooms. The result showed that while these teachers were familiar with action research and its principles they did not use it in their classrooms as they regarded it as a duty of professional researchers. In the same line, Rahimi, Madani, and Rahimi [13] had a study with the aim of identification of university teachers' action research skills in higher education in Iran. The results revealed that a large number of university teachers had no information about the role of action research in improving the quality of teaching and learning.

A mixed-method study on the effects of participation in action research on EFL teachers' practice was conducted by Sheidaei and Tahriri [14]. The qualitative phase of the study included the use of reflective journals. Both qualitative and quantitative findings revealed that conducting action research had a significant effect on teachers' practice and helped them to reflect on their teaching and build the capacity to solve the problems that led to teachers' professional development.

Mehrani [15] conducted a survey study on Iranian EFL teachers' experiences of doing action research, which showed that teachers believed that action research has some advantages like promoting their understanding of language education, providing a framework for reflecting on their practice, empowering them to play more important roles in the educational system, expanding their awareness of the students' needs.

Ghafoori and Baharlooie[16] explored high school EFL teachers' attitudes toward collaborative action research. The results showed that the participants had positive attitudes toward collaborative action research.

Chou [17] investigated the effect of collaborative action research on in-service teachers by using the post-course questionnaire, classroom video clips, teachers' discussions, reflective journals, and action research papers. The result showed that collaborative action research in an in-service teacher training program helps the construction of teachers' knowledge, and improves their confidence.

Cabaroglu [18] conducted a study to investigate teachers' professional development through action research. The results showed improvement in participants' experiences in teaching efficacies, self-awareness, and problem-solving skills. These results also revealed that action research was a valuable tool for developing candidate teachers' self-efficacy.

A qualitative study by Castro Garcés and Martínez Granada [4] intended to observe the role of collaborative action research in teachers' professional development. The data of the study were collected through surveys, journals, and meetings. The results revealed that through collaborative action research teachers can work together, share their classroom experiences with peers, and learn from each other, which leads to professional development.

The article's goal. The present study, as its main objective, sought the effect of EFL teachers' collaborative action research in an online discussion group on their reflective practice. The study is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it emphasizes the role of collaborative action research and its impact on teachers' reflective practice. Secondly, it focuses on using technology as a tool for EFL teachers' development. Thirdly, it explores the use of online discussion as an effective way for teachers to do collaborative action research.

2. THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS

In the 1960s and 1970s, scholars began focusing on the humanistic approach in their studies, which ignored human subjectivity and emphasized the 'whole person' view. During this time, educational research broadened to include action research, which was based on the assumption that every teacher is a researcher in her/his own right [19]. It was postulated that meaningful research can be carried out by teachers in a natural setting of the classroom and provide opportunities for them to improve their instructional practices.

Action research has been defined by many scholars in different ways. Calhoun [20, p.11] defines action research as "let's study what's happening at our school and decide how to make it a better place". In this way, teachers face some questions such as "what do I know already about this particular phenomenon? How do I understand what is happening?" and 'Is the knowledge already available and could I acquire it in any other way?' [21, p. 497]. Richards and Farrell [22] state that the word 'research' refers to a systematic view for investigations and data collection with the purpose of illuminating a problem and improving the practice, whereas they define 'action' as a practical activity to solve issues. According to Edwards and Burns [1], action research is teachers' taking 'action' through 'research', in which they explore important classroom issues to better understand an aspect of teaching or learning. It is expected that action research leads to awareness of their teaching process and problems and improvement of their practice. As Richards [23, p.236] notes, "it (action research) is powerful because, although it demands the same standards of inquiry as other legitimate forms of research, it goes beyond mere discovery and embeds the findings of the research in a process of professional self-discovery and development". In addition, action research is beneficial to both teachers and students, since it can be used as a tool for improving the teaching/learning environment [24].

Since action research is a research-based educational process, it is based on teachers' understanding of the challenges and the discovery of solutions for those challenges [25]. The action research process creates a bridge between the ideal (effective ways) and the real (actual way) in a social situation [26]. According to Burns [26], the action research process involves researchers' planning, undertaking action to the situation, observing, and documenting the results. In this regard, as Burns [27] explains, while there are numerous variations of the action research process, the best-known version is devised by Kemmis and McTaggart [28], in which the action research process includes planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Figure 1). These processes are used to support understanding or improvements in teaching practice[1].

Based on Kemmis and McTaggart [28], at the first stage of action research, the problem is identified and a plan is developed. At the stage of acting, the plan is put into action using some potential strategies. At the third stage, the teacher observes the effect of the action and

the results of the strategies in the context and analyses data and the effects and changes to interpret the results and form the conclusion for the study. The last stage is reflecting on the effect of the action and evaluating the outcomes.

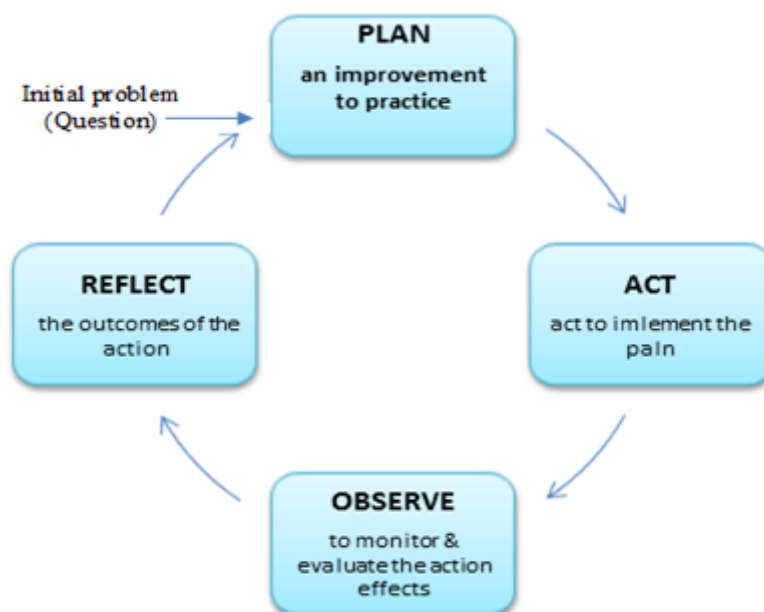


Figure1. The stages of action research cycle

Despite the benefits of action research, it seems that teachers' pondering on their own practice is less successful than their work in collaboration [29]. Collaborative action research is a type of action research that is based on teachers' group work on a problem. Therefore, the project includes a team that has a common focus and area of knowledge in which the stakeholders come together and share their knowledge to examine the issue and understand it [19]. Their team can include two teachers, a large group of teachers, or a group composed of teachers and researchers. As Chou [17, p.2729] explains, the purpose of this type of action research is "to utilize the expertise of the collaboration and to foster sustained dialogue among educational stakeholders" and it is a collaborative way for exploring answers to the questions that are important for all members. What distinguishes this type of action research is that it is done by teachers who are interested in developing their professional practice and learning more about research [27]. In this type of group work, teachers can share their information, experiences, and ideas. There are lots of benefits in doing action research collaboratively. When action research is done collaboratively, more opportunities for professional development and professional learning will be provided for teachers [4],[30]. Collaborative action research also provides positive interpersonal relationship, mutual support [31], collegiality, and trust [32] while teachers aim at pursuing common goals. Besides, it may provide a sheltered environment for teachers taking risks [33]. Above all, technology can provide a suitable condition for teachers' collaboration [34].

In recent years there has been increasing attention to the use of technology in educational settings and the use of different technological tools such as laptops, computers, and digital cameras in education has had a great impact on both the teaching and learning process[35]. According to Shohel, Mahruf, and Kirkwood[36], using technologies for improving the teaching and learning process is a way to overcome the training challenges. It is an integral part of English language education. By using technological tools like CD players, computers, the internet and software applications like electronic workbooks and dictionaries, and programs for grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, EFL teachers update

their knowledge and at the same time provide a suitable learning environment for learners. In addition, students can practice four language skills, engage in an interactive process of learning and find answers to their questions [37]. According to Singhal [38, p. 2], interactive video and programs which provide more authentic and communicative task-based activities are being created, which are more in line with the current theoretical and pedagogical views of learning. Moreover, digital technologies can offer both synchronous and asynchronous communication, so “there is a wealth of opportunities for preservice teachers to investigate topics and issues within the global classroom, with peers and experts” [39, p.1].

Additionally, the development of communicative media and collaboration technology provides a forum for teachers, especially those who lack face-to-face collaboration to take part in authentic discourse to share their knowledge, experiences, and perspectives and learn from each other [39], [40]. Since the term ‘online’ denotes social interaction [41], online collaboration usually refers to online discussions which “focus on the cognitive process by emphasizing task-oriented communication” [40, p. 69]. According to An et al. [40, p.66], there are three teachers’ benefits from online collaboration: improvement of teachers’ metacognitive knowledge; their awareness “of the value of a supportive learning community”; and their recognition “of the constructive use of online communication tools”. Moreover, the flexibility of the online environment can provide solutions to some problems like access, equality, geographical issues, and soon [42]. Above all, teachers’ learning can be facilitated through the online context in which details and implications of knowledge can be understood and applied [43]. That is why, Morphy et al. [44, p.11] explain that technology affects reflective practice, as “technology can also offer a completely new perspective and tools for reflection”, and it provides “opportunities for enhancing process-reflection and learning helping skills” [44, p.8]. In the same line, Sarkar [45, p.31] adds that “management institutes and educators have attempted an increased incorporation of collaborative group work, problem-solving and decision-making through technology as an integral component of pedagogy”.

It seems that reflection is an integral part of action research. The action research process starts with teachers’ reflection on students learning [24]. Moreover, action research involves teachers’ reflection as they deal with issues that occur in specific contexts [18]. Furthermore, it has been reported that engagement in research results in an improvement in teachers’ level of reflectivity [15], [30]. This indicates the importance of the role of reflection in action research. The term ‘reflection’ for the first time was mentioned by Dewey [46] as a ‘systematic form of problem-solving’ [47, p.481]. Reflection is thinking about self and self-consciousness. It can be defined as a “powerful way to know about self...” [48, p. 3]. In education, reflection is the way in which learning can be constructed through pondering on interaction, experiences, and beliefs [49]. In addition, as Lin, Gorrell, and Porter [49] assert, through establishing a connection between studies and beliefs, and thinking about their knowledge of the teaching and learning process, teachers’ knowledge and beliefs are challenged. Teachers’ reflection starts with teachers looking back to their experiences and it can lead to improvement of teachers’ knowledge and change in their beliefs [50].

2.1 Research questions

1. What are EFL teachers’ perceptions of action research?
2. Does participating in an online collaborative action research group empower EFL teachers’ reflective practice?
3. How does online collaborative action research contribute to the promotion of reflective thinking?

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Design of the Study

The present study used both quantitative and qualitative methods in its design. In the first phase, a pretest-posttest design was adopted, in which participants were given a pre-test before the treatment and a post-test after the treatment to measure the effects of treatment [51]. In the second phase, a semi-structured interview was used.

3.2 Participants

A group of 23 EFL teachers of language schools (17 females, 6 males), whose ages ranged between twenty-five to thirty-five, were selected for the objectives of this investigation. All teachers had experience in English language teaching from three to fifteen years. The participants' native language was Persian and they had studied English as a foreign language. About 61% of the teachers had a Master of Arts (MA) and others (39%) had a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree in English. The participants' selection was based on convenience sampling, which is a type of non-probability sampling in which the sample is taken from the population that is close at hand or easy to contact.

3.3 Instruments

3.3.1 Teachers' beliefs about research and action research Questionnaire

For the first research question, the data were collected through a questionnaire developed by (Dehghan & Sahragard) [12], which is based on EFL teachers' views on action research. The questionnaire includes 25 items. The questionnaire investigates the language teachers' beliefs about research in general and classroom or action research in particular. A Likerttype scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) was used to rate the answers.

3.3.2 English Language Teacher Reflective Inventory (ELTRI) Questionnaire

For the second research question, a questionnaire developed by (Akbari, Behzadpoor & Dadvand)[52] was used to collect data. This questionnaire consists of 42 items and includes 6 components (7 behavioral items for each component). A 5-point Likert scale ranging from "always" to "never" is used to assess English language teachers' reflective practice.

3.3.3 Semi-structured interviews

For the qualitative data, a semi-structured interview was conducted with 12 volunteer participants to investigate the effect of collaborative action research on EFL teachers' reflective practice. Semi-structured interviews involved pre-determined questions about the effect of collaborative action research on the participants' teaching practice and their reflection. Moreover, the participants were asked to freely express their ideas about the effect of online collaborative action research. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. The researchers recorded and transcribed the responses.

3.4 Procedure

A group of 23 EFL teachers participated in this study and all were told that their participation was completely voluntary. At first, a questionnaire developed by (Dehghan & Sahragard)[12] and a questionnaire developed by (Akbari, Behzadpoor & Dadvand)[52] were sent to the EFL teachers to collect data about the teachers' views on action research and to assess these teachers' reflective practice. Since we did not have direct access to the EFL teachers, the scales were developed and gathered via Google Forms. As the next step, the

teachers received the treatment (Table 1), which was developed based on Kemmis and McTaggart's [28] action research model. Finally, the teachers were asked to answer the pretest questionnaire again. Prior to the study, none of the teachers had any knowledge about action research. As the last stage, twelve EFL teachers were invited to the interview.

Table 1

Stages of the treatment

Stages of treatment	Details
1	In the first two sessions, some essays about action research were uploaded for the EFL teachers in order to gain a basic familiarity with the concept of action research. The participants were required to answer two questions regarding the extracts and send the answers to the first researcher's email. Appropriate feedback regarding the content of emails was sent to the researcher.
2	In the next three sessions, three videos about the two teachers who were randomly selected and whose courses were video recorded were uploaded to the WhatsApp group and the teachers were asked to: a. Answer some thought-provoking questions about the videos. b. comment on the teachers' practice. c. The participant/participants was/were asked about any alternative strategies they could adopt and if they could behave differently. d. The whole group was required to send their comments to the researcher's email, to which the appropriate response was provided by the researcher.
3	In the last five sessions, the teachers were asked to write if they had modified their teaching experiences in the upcoming teaching sessions.
4	They were asked to write about their reflections and send them to the researcher's email.
5	The researcher responded with the necessary feedback and chose 5 accounts of reflections and shared them on the WhatsApp group.
6	Teachers were required to read the other 5 teachers' writings and write their ideas or comments about them.

3.5 Data Analysis

This study is a quantitative study that is based on collecting and analyzing numerical data. Data were collected using a survey instrument in which participants are asked directly. The data collection process included both the initial and final surveys. The data obtained from these questionnaires were analyzed by SPSS software through statistical analysis of paired t-test in which "the focus is within a group (person's performance before treatment compared with his or her performance after treatment)" [51, p.315].

4. THE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To assess the normality of distribution of the data and to decide on using a parametric or nonparametric test to analyze the data, the normality of data was explored using a One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test. Table 2 shows the results of this test.

Table 2

One-Sample Kolmogorov- Smirnov Test

		Reflection pretest	Reflection posttest
N		23	23
Normal Parameters	Mean	94.4348	122.6522
	Std. Deviation	19.65111	14.51835
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.162	.131
	Positive	.142	.061
	Negative	-.162	-.131
Test Statistic		.162	.131
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.121	.200
<i>a. Test distribution is Normal.</i>			

As Table 2 indicates, the results of the one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test reveal that the distribution of data is normal ($\text{sig} > 0.05$). Accordingly, it is possible to use parametric tests to analyze data.

The first research question examined perceptions of EFL teachers' regarding action research. The researchers used a questionnaire to gather the data. At the first stage of data analysis, mean and standard deviation of each item of the questionnaire were calculated. The mean score and Std. deviation of each item of the questionnaire are showed in Table 3.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of the Items of the Questionnaire

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Teachers must conduct research to solve their problems in the class.	1.86	.757
2. In my view, research is the duty of "professional researchers".	2.39	.583
3. Research is one of my prime duties as a teacher.	2.43	.58977
4. Action research is an important type of professional research.	4.08	.900
5. A teacher should have necessary skills in order to perform research in her/his class.	2.34	1.152
6. Doing classroom research improves teaching and learning.	3.47	.994
7. Performing classroom research needs familiarity with complex statistical concepts.	2.08	.900
8. Problems in the classroom can be solved through using action research.	2.78	.850
9. Research must necessarily include specific concepts like variables, hypothesis, statistics, etc.	3.78	.951
10. Classroom research is impossible.	2.43	.50687
11. Some research procedures like creating control and experimental groups are not suitable for classrooms (because some students lack certain methods and materials).	2.17	.38755
12. Conducting research involves specific research skills (familiarity with different research types, data, statistics, etc.)	3.13	1.254

13. Research should necessarily be conducted by experts.	4.30	.634
14. Subjects investigated by professional researchers are not often related to the daily problems of language classrooms.	2.04	.877
15. Subjects investigated by professional researchers are not often related to students' real needs.	4.17	.716
16. The results of professional research are not beneficial to language teachers.	2.34	1.265
17. The language of professional research articles is highly specialized.	4.52	.510
18. Even if professional research deals with classroom problems and students' needs, they are so specialized that are useless for language teachers.	4.17	.716
19. A teacher can be a researcher by conducting action research in his/her classroom.	2.17	.936
20. Classroom research helps teachers solve the problems of their classes.	3.43	.506
21. Action research is one of the duties of all teachers.	3.73	.915
22. I regard action research as the best way to improve my professionalism.	3.56	1.121
23. Action research helps my students learn better.	3.00	.904
24. Whenever I encounter a problem in my classroom, I try to solve it through action research.	3.39	1.033
25. Action research is the most practical method of research for teachers.	4.30	.634

The mean scores of all items of the questionnaire were compared (mean=3). Accordingly, teachers had positive attitudes on the items whose mean scores were higher than 3. As the above Table illustrates, most of the participants of the present study stated that action research is an important type of professional research (item 4, mean=4.08). They also believed that doing classroom research improves teaching and learning (item 6, mean=3.47). Moreover, the teachers stated that research must necessarily include specific concepts like variables, hypothesis, statistics, etc. (item 9, mean=3.78). In their view, conducting research involves specific research skills (familiarity with different research types, data, statistics, etc.) (item 12, mean= 3.13). They also believed that research should necessarily be conducted by experts (item 13, mean=4.30).

Additionally, most of the teachers agreed that subjects investigated by professional researchers are not often related to students' real needs (item 15, mean=4.17). According to Table 3, most of the participants of the present study believed that the language of professional research articles is highly specialized and even if professional research deals with classroom problems and students' needs, they are so specialized that are useless for language teachers (items 17-18).

The teachers' answers to item 20 indicated that classroom research helps teachers solve the problems of their classes. Moreover, majority of them believed that action research is one of the duties of all teachers (item 21, mean=3.73). They stated that they regarded action research as the best way to improve their professionalism, and that it helps their students learn better (items 22-23). They also agreed that whenever they encounter a problem in their classroom, they try to solve it through action research and they regarded action research as the most practical method of research for teachers (items 24-25).

To find the Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of action research at the next stage of data analysis, the participants' scores of action research questionnaire were compared with the mean score of the questionnaire (mean=3) using One-Sample t-test. The results are reported in two tables of descriptive and inferential statistics. The results of descriptive statistics are reported in Table 4.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics of the EFL Teachers' Answers to Action Research Questionnaire

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
mean	20	3.13	.128	.028

Table 4 shows the mean score and Std. deviation of the teachers' answers to the action research questionnaire. As can be seen, the mean score and std. deviation of action research questionnaire are 3.13 and 0.128, respectively. The results of one- sample t-test are reported in Table 5.

Table 5

One-Sample t-Test of Action Research Questionnaire

Test Value = 3						
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
mean	335	22	.000	.126	.0662	.1877

In Table 5, the mean score of the participants' answers is compared to the mean score of the questionnaire. As it is shown, the Sig (2-tailed) of the action research questionnaire was lower than the significance level ($0.000 < 0.05$). Based on the results, the researchers concluded that the participants of the study had optimistic views towards action research.

The second research question inquired if participating in online discussion groupson action research empowers EFL teachers' reflective practice. To find the answer to the second research question of the present study, a set of descriptive statistics and a paired sample t-test were used. The researchers used a questionnaire to gather the required data. It was administered two times to the participants; at the beginning as the pretest and at the end of the treatment course as the posttest. Then to find the effect of the treatment on the participants' level of reflection, the results of the pretest and posttest were compared using Paired samples t-test. The results of the Paired Samples statistics are reported in Table 6.

Table 6

Paired Samples Statistics of Teachers' Reflective Practice

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Pair 1	pretest	94.43	23	19.651
	posttest	122.65	23	14.518

According to the above Table, the mean score of the pre-test of teachers' reflective practice was 94.43 and the mean score of their post-test was 122.65. Moreover, the Std. deviation of the pretest and posttest of the teachers' reflective practice was 19.651 and 14.518, respectively. The results of the paired sample t-test are reported in Table 7.

Table 7

Paired Samples t-Test of Teachers' Reflective Practice

		Paired Differences							
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pretest-posttest	-28.21	15.09	3.146	-34.743	-21.691	-8.968	22	.000

Based on the Table, the results of the paired samples t-test revealed that there was a significant difference between the teachers' mean score of pretest and posttest of reflective practice ($t=-8.96$, $df=22$, $P<0.05$). Since the mean score of the posttest is higher than that of the pretest and $Sig=0.000$ ($Sig<0.05$) it could be concluded that online discussion improves EFL teachers' reflective practice.

To answer the third research question, in the second phase of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 volunteer teachers. Based on the thematic analysis (Table 8), the interviewees expressed their positive attitudes towards collaborative action research supported and facilitated by online discussion groups. More specifically, all teachers underscored the value of feedback they receive through online collaborative action research. Nine teachers also affirmed that collaborative action research helps them reflect on and learn from their colleagues' experiences. They reported that online discussions promoted their understanding. They believed that they learned quite a lot from their colleagues, since they shared their different views with them. This is echoed in a teacher's expression: *What I receive through the online discussion empowers me, since I receive feedback from other teachers, especially more experienced ones. This is very different from when you work alone and can not see your weaknesses. I often think about the feedback I've received from them and think what is right or wrong about them.*

In addition, as the analysis of responses revealed, in some occasions each teacher had the role of an observer who commented on the event and in other cases they gave up passing any judgment and welcomed comments by the colleagues.

The EFL teachers had also positive views of online collaborative action research. In this regard nine teachers recognized the potential of collaborative action research in connecting theory to practice.

One teacher reported that *We have been taught lots of theories in universities and studied various related books and articles; however, it was difficult to connect the theories to what happens practically in the real classrooms. This [collaborative action research] enabled me to think more deeply about those theories and evaluate their usefulness in real classroom context.*

The other teacher pointing to the merits of this kind of activity reported, *In such groups I draw on the things I have learned theoretically and try to assess if it is possible to apply that knowledge to the problem at hand.*

The interviewees also highlighted the benefit of online collaborative action research as they stated that it helps them assess the effectiveness of their teaching practice and at the same

time reconsider their long held beliefs. As a teacher remarked, *When I come to think of it, we [should] sometimes assess the ideas we have stuck to and think about their effectiveness. The things I have learned through experience may not work in all situations and are not always helpful. They even might be totally wrong.*

A few teachers believed that collaborative action research helps them reflect on the cooperation rather than competition in their community. As they said, during collaborative research in their classrooms, positive social changes occur. It was interesting that the teachers believed that the activity gave them a sense of ownership, and the cooperation among teachers resulted in their self-efficacy. A teacher commented that *It is very surprising that after concreting on problem situations of our classrooms and talking about the shared experiences we forget the competition. The atmosphere is so different. Now I think that I felt that everyone is included in the activity. I used to withhold information from my colleagues since I thought that I needed to keep the important experience or information for myself. It also helped me change my belief about my capabilities. This was perhaps because of the more closer relationship with other teachers.*

Overall, the EFL teachers' views towards the impact of collaborative online learning on their reflectivity were positive, nevertheless the online courses posed a different type of problem to language teachers, which was the low speed of Internet connection.

Table 8

The effect of collaborative Action Research on EFL teachers' reflective practice

Benefits	F	P
1. I think about the constructive feedback I receive from other colleagues.	12	100
2. It helps me think and learn from my colleagues' experiences	10	83.3
3. It helps me recognize the possible relationship between theory and practice.	9	75
4. It helps me gain from the positive relationship with colleagues.	8	66.6
5. It helps me assess the effectiveness of my teaching practice.	6	50
6. It helps me reconsider my long-held beliefs.	6	50
7. It encourages me to reflect on cooperation developed among teachers	4	37
8. It empowers teachers' self-efficacy	4	37

5. CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The aim of the first research question of the present study was to explore the Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of action research. Based on the results obtained from the data analysis, it was revealed that the majority of the participants of the study believed that action research is an important type of professional research and that doing classroom research improves teaching and learning. The teachers' answers to other items of the questionnaire also indicated that classroom research helps teachers solve the problems they face in their classroom practices. Moreover, most of them believed that action research is one of the duties of all teachers. They stated that they regarded action research as the best way to improve their professionalism and that it helps their students learn better.

The results of the first research question comply with the results of some of the previous studies [12],[2],[15],[53], [54], [55]. In line with the results of Mehrani [15], we concluded

that Iranian EFL teachers are aware of the benefits of doing action research and they regard it as a valuable way to solve their classroom problems. Moreover, in tandem with the results of Morales, et al.'s [53] study, the results of the present study indicated that in teachers' view doing action research influenced their professional development and enhanced their teaching ability, and resulted in their reflection. Also, in agreement with the results of Osterman and Kottkamp [55], the results of the present study indicated that Iranian EFL teachers considered action research as an effective way to professional growth and development.

The second research question aimed to investigate whether online discussion promotes EFL teachers' reflective practice. The results revealed that online discussion has a significant effect on the teachers' level of reflective practice. In other words, the experimental group's better performance in the posttest was due to their participation in online discussions. The results are in line with Ruan and Griffith [56], Lee-Baldwin [57], and Tsang [58]. These researchers reported that online discussion could be regarded as an effective tool in improving the reflective practices of teachers.

The answer to the third research question, which constituted the qualitative phase of the study, confirmed the results obtained from the quantitative phase. The participants highlighted the value of feedback they receive through online collaborative action research. They also affirmed that collaborative action research helps them learn from their colleagues' experiences. The findings corroborate those of Adams and Townsend [59], and van Oostveen [8], who highlighted the importance of collaboration in action research. They reported that online groups had the potential of helping them connect theories to practice. This supports the claim made by Mitchell et al [3, p.346], who hold that while teachers are involved in collaborative action research they "draw upon what they knew theoretically from their studies and ... apply that knowledge to the problem at hand". It was also declared that online collaborative action research helps teachers assess the effectiveness of their teaching practice and at the same time reconsider their long-held beliefs. Such a finding is in tandem with the literature which states that collaborative action research helps teachers cope with the problems in their daily practice [60]. A few interviewees believed that collaborative action research contributes to their cooperation rather than competition in the teaching community and this results in their self-efficacy. This lends support to the studies conducted by Farrell [5] and Gordon and Solis [61], which state that action research improves teachers' self-efficacy and feeling of empowerment.

The findings could be interpreted in light of the related literature. The role of reflection is a broadly accepted and desired practice in teacher education programs [62]. Reflection on teaching experiences could develop instructors' learning process and decision-making [63], strengthen teacher self-efficacy and identity [64], and produce "more skilled, more capable, and in general better teachers" [65, p. xvii]. While instructors engage in critical reflection and reflective practice, they reach a high teaching level in their daily practice [56]. It also can be argued that through online discussion, teachers share their experiences and accordingly they become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses in teaching. It makes them capable of thinking more about their teaching and gaining higher levels of reflective practice. Therefore, in many professional contexts, it is significant to develop communities of practice to promote knowledge among professionals with "shared expertise and passion" [66, p.139]. Similarly, the significance of providing a learning community to improve reflective thinking and reflective practice among teachers is also well established in teacher education literature [65]. It is significant to provide an environment that improves dialogue and conversation among teachers via discussions [65].

Unfortunately, in many teacher education courses, reflective practice is still considered as a personal and private act rather than a communicative and collaborative act [56]. At the same time, the advancement in technology and the increase in individuals' access to the

Internet provide opportunities for teachers to use online discussion as an effective tool to promote their level of reflection.

The results of this study present some pedagogical implications for language learners and teachers. They may benefit teacher education and teacher development programs by encouraging online knowledge sharing as an influential tool to improve EFL teachers' reflective practices. If EFL teachers are given the opportunity to participate in online discussions while being engaged in action research, they can develop their reflective practices in such a way that they can assess their own teaching practices by assessing their experiences both inside and outside the language classroom. Moreover, online discussion could be planned to improve mutual support from colleagues so that pre-service or in-service teachers could participate in teacher interaction and collaboration within a professional learning community through online discussions. Perhaps, as Block [67] argues, apart from other benefits, this may help EFL teachers develop more intimate relationships with other colleagues. Moreover, the results of the present paper might have some advantages for future teacher education programs by providing more opportunities for inexperienced teachers to share knowledge and build upon common experiences.

There were some limitations in conducting the present research. First, a larger number of participants could have offered more insights into the analysis of the effect of collaborative action research. Moreover, the role of gender and EFL teachers' teaching experience were not considered in this study. Besides, this study considered only the perceptions and conceptions of doing action research of teachers from language institutes, and replicating the study with high school teachers may yield different results, since, as Moradkhani and Shirazizadeh [68] put it, in Iran, two systems of teaching EFL in language schools and high schools differ regarding teachers' proficiencies in English, the curriculum, EFL learners' motivation and so on.

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ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ СПІЛЬНИХ ДІЙ ОНЛАЙН В КОНТЕКСТІ EFL: ВПЛИВ НА РЕФЛЕКСИВНУ ПРАКТИКУ ВЧИТЕЛІВ

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Анотація. Технології можуть бути інтегровані в педагогічну освіту з метою їх подальшого використання вчителем для розширення можливостей викладання за межами аудиторії. Представлене дослідження було спробою вивчити думку вчителів англійської мови як іноземної (EFL - English as a Foreign Language) щодо дослідження дій, а також вплив їх спільних дій на їх рефлексивну практику в онлайн дискусійній групі. Автори вивчали, яким чином спільне онлайн дослідження дій сприяє розвитку рефлексивного мислення. Учасниками цього дослідження були 23 іранських викладачі англійської мови як іноземної, відібраних на основі випадкової вибірки. Дослідження складалося з попереднього і післяекспериментального тестування. На початку і в кінці дослідження учасники отримали дві анкети. Потім, протягом 10 сесій вони брали участь в онлайн дискусійних групах, у яких читали і дивилися есе і відео, писали роботи з деяких тем і ділилися своїми ідеями і досвідом. Для узагальнення результатів були проведені напівструктуровані інтерв'ю з 12 учасниками. Результат дослідження показав, що більшість учасників оптимістично поставились до вивчення процесів. Крім того, участь в онлайн дискусійних групах дозволила їм ретельніше ставитись до своєї педагогічної практики і підвищення рівня рефлексії. Результати якісного етапу показали, що онлайн курси по-різному вплинули на практику вчителів і їх рефлексію. Незважаючи на всі дослідження, проведені в Ірані, були отримані суперечливі результати щодо прийняття вчителями дослідження дій. Крім того, наскільки відомо дослідникам, в жодному дослідженні не вивчалось використання спільних онлайн досліджень щодо рефлексії вчителів. На думку авторів, проведення цього дослідження є необхідним для вивчення ролі дослідження дій як основи для поліпшення рефлексивної практики.

Ключові слова: дослідження дій; спільне онлайн дослідження дій; онлайн дискусійна група; вчителі англійської мови як іноземної; рефлексивна практика.

ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ СОВМЕСТНЫХ ДЕЙСТВИЙ ОНЛАЙН В КОНТЕКСТЕ EFL: ВЛИЯНИЕ НА РЕФЛЕКСИВНУЮ ПРАКТИКУ УЧИТЕЛЕЙ

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Аннотация. Технологии могут быть интегрированы в педагогическое образование с целью их дальнейшего использования учителем для расширения возможностей преподавания за пределами аудитории. Представленное исследование было попыткой изучить мнение учителей английского языка как иностранного (EFL - English as a Foreign Language) относительно исследования действий, а также влияние их совместных действий на их рефлексивную практику в онлайн-дискуссионной группе. Авторы изучали, каким образом совместное онлайн-исследование действий способствует развитию рефлексивного мышления. Участниками этого исследования были 23 иранских преподавателя английского языка как иностранного, отобранных на основе случайной выборки. Исследование состояло из предварительного и послезекспериментального тестирования. В начале и в конце исследования участники получили две анкеты. Затем, в течение 10 сессий, они приняли участие в онлайн-дискуссионных группах, в которых читали и смотрели эссе и видео, писали работы по некоторым темам и делились своими идеями и опытом. Для обобщения результатов были проведены полуструктурированные интервью с 12 участниками. Результат исследования показал, что большинство участников оптимистично отнеслись к исследованию действий. Кроме того, участие в онлайн-дискуссионных группах позволило им больше задуматься о своей педагогической практике и повысить уровень рефлексии. Результаты качественного этапа показали, что онлайн-курсы по-разному повлияли на практику учителей и их рефлексию. Несмотря на все исследования, проведенные в Иране, были получены противоречивые результаты относительно восприятия учителями исследования действий. Кроме того, насколько известно исследователям, ни в одном исследовании не изучалось использование совместных онлайн-исследований в отношении рефлексии учителей. По мнению авторов, проведение этого исследования является необходимым для изучения роли исследования действий как основы для улучшения рефлексивной практики.

Ключевые слова: исследование действий; совместное онлайн-исследование действий; онлайн-дискуссионная группа; учителя английского языка как иностранного; рефлексивная практика.

