

# Exploring Myanmar EFL Teachers' Reflective Practice Experiences through Reflecting on Critical Incidents as their Professional Development

Soe Sandar Pyae

Department of Educational Studies, Hakha Education Degree College, Myanmar

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1026EDU0344>

Received: 17 May 2026; Accepted: 22 May 2026; Published: 16 June 2026

## ABSTRACT

Reflection is an essential practice in English language teaching, and it is necessary for teachers to reflect on their teaching practices for professional development. However, very few studies have explored EFL teachers' reflection on critical incidents as professional development through two rounds of self-reflection and online group reflection. This study aimed to investigate three EFL teachers' reflective practice experiences through reflecting on critical incidents as their professional development in Myanmar. The narrative inquiry method was used, and snowball sampling was applied to recruit three EFL teachers from the politically affected rural areas. The participant teachers were required to engage in self-reflections via narrative frames and group reflections virtually for two weeks. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data about their learning experiences by reflecting on critical incidents. Thematic analysis was applied to analyse the data. The findings indicated six critical incidents that were identified from teachers' teaching lows and teaching highs. Although EFL teachers in this study were in an educational system, it was found that they reported different critical incidents. They felt both positive and negative emotions at the time of critical incidents. The six sub-themes related to their learning experiences in professional development emerged. This study also highlighted the importance of reflecting on critical incidents for EFL teachers' professional development. Further research should recruit more EFL teachers in investigating their reflection on critical incidents, and use mixed-method study by applying a simple random sampling method to get more in-depth data. Moreover, future research should be done by using critical incident analysis or other reflective tools with more frequent reflection to understand EFL teachers' reflective practice experiences in depth.

**Keywords:** English as a Foreign Language (EFL), critical incidents, reflective practice, professional development

## INTRODUCTION

Reflection has been an essential practice in teacher education and teacher professional development for over three decades since its popularity in the field of education (Pinnegar & Lay, 2023). In order to learn, it needs reflection, and reflective thinking plays an important role in teachers' learning (Rogers, 2002; York-Barr, et al., 2001). Reflecting on teachers' practice supports their learning and professional growth throughout their career by creating opportunities for teachers to think critically about their teaching practices, beliefs, and personal and professional experiences (Agnihotri et al., 2024; Steffy et al., 2000).

When it comes to the term 'reflection', it dates back to Deweyan times. Dewey (1933) defined reflection as an "active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 9). Schön (1983) differentiated reflection as reflection-in-action, that occurs simultaneously with action and reflection-on-action, that people learn from their experience or action. According to Osterman and Kottkamp (1993), reflective practice is "a means by which practitioners can develop a greater level of self-awareness about the nature and impact of their performance, an awareness that creates opportunities for professional growth and development". By doing reflective practice, teachers can modify their pedagogical approaches and overcome challenges and uncertainties that they encounter

in their teaching careers (Agnihotri, et al., 2024). Thus, reflective practice is effective for teachers' professional growth and development.

Richards and Farrell (2010) state that "a critical incident is an unplanned and unanticipated event that occurs during a lesson and that serves to trigger insights about some aspect of teaching and learning" (p. 13). Farrell (2013) argues that the critical incidents can occur during the classroom period or outside the classroom. According to Nejadghanbar and Mohammadi (2024), critical incidents are "unplanned and unexpected events that happen during a lesson or outside of the classroom, leading to insights about teaching and learning". A critical incident can become critical and significant when it has value and meaning. When teachers reflect on their lessons, they evaluate their lessons critically, and it can be assumed as a critical incident. In doing so, they ask themselves some questions about what happened and why it happened, and apply these critical incidents in their future classrooms (Richards & Farrell, 2010). Teachers can analyse these critical incidents when they reflect on a 'teaching high' or a 'teaching low' (Thiel, 1999, cited in Farrell, 2013).

By analysing the critical incidents, teachers can pay attention to special circumstances that occur during teaching. For instance, a teacher can adapt the lesson while they are teaching in the class because they think the activity involved in the lesson is going well and brings positive outcomes to students' learning. However, teacher can recall, describe, and analyse the challenging incidents that they are not planned in their lessons, such as removing a planned activity from their lesson plan. By doing so, teachers can examine their beliefs and views on effective instructional strategies and activities (Farrell, 2024).

In Myanmar, the basic education system has been reformed from 5+4+2 system to KG+5+4+3 system since 2016. In recent years, the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) (2021-2030) has been initiated in Myanmar. To ensure success in implementing the NESP (2021-2030) reforms, the Ministry of Education (MOE) sets a target for all in-service teachers in basic education to have access to opportunities for annual continuous professional development (MOE, 2023). In addition, in the Myanmar Teacher Competency Standard Framework, the teachers need to "regularly reflect on a wide range of actions and experiences to identify areas for own continuous professional development as a teacher" (MOE, p. 136, 2020). Hence, it reveals that basic education teachers need to reflect on their teaching practices for their personal and continuous professional development in the current Myanmar education system.

### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The current research project aims to investigate EFL teachers' reflective practice experiences through reflecting on critical incidents as their professional development in Myanmar.

To achieve the research aim of the present study, there are three research objectives as follows:

1. To explore the significant critical incidents that EFL teachers in Myanmar identify in the process of reflection
2. To identify their initial emotional responses at the time of critical incidents
3. To examine their learning experiences by reflecting on critical incidents

### **Research Questions**

The research questions (based on the literature review) are described as follows:

1. What significant critical incidents do EFL teachers in Myanmar reflect in the process of reflection?
2. What are their initial emotional responses at the time of critical incidents?
3. How do they learn from reflecting on critical incidents?

## Significance of the Study

Reflective practice has played an important role in teacher education and teachers' professional development. To engage in reflective practice, language teachers can use reflecting on critical incidents, which is one of the powerful tools for improving their self-awareness, teaching practices and long-term professional growth (Farrell, 2024; Maliha & Noordin, 2025). Therefore, it is essential to investigate language teachers' reflective practice experiences through reflecting on critical incidents as their professional development.

When it comes to studies on reflecting on critical incidents in the field of pre-service teacher education, Farrell (2008) examined ELT trainee teachers' reflections on critical incidents during their teaching in Singapore. He found that their critical incidents can be categorized into nine topics regarding teaching and learning English, including language proficiency, classroom participation, gender, lesson objectives, and other categories. Nejadghanbar (2021) also explored the effects of novice English teachers' reflection on critical incidents through individual reflection and group reflection. Real examples of critical incidents were presented to these pre-service teachers. They reflected these critical incidents individually and then in groups. After they did group reflection, just over two-thirds of participants revised their initial reactions to critical incidents that they did in individual reflection, with some changes or total changes.

Moreover, Bruster and Peterson (2013) examined the student teachers' use of critical incidents as a reflective tool during their clinical teaching. They found that there was a significant difference between the two groups: one group that wrote traditional journaling and the other that weblogged. The former could write more complex reflections of classroom situations than the latter. Participants who weblogged asked more questions about how to solve teaching-related problems. They stated that using the critical incident technique promoted participants' reflective practice and critical thinking.

Turning to the in-service teachers' reflective practice experiences on critical incidents in ELT literature, Farrell (2013) analysed an ESL teacher's critical incident that was explained to her peer in the teacher reflection group. After reflecting on using a narrative framework, she had more self-awareness as a teacher and her teaching practices. She felt empowered by sharing and reflecting on her story. Wijaya and Kuswando (2018) conducted another study investigating the effectiveness of reflecting on critical incidents on English teachers in a private school. The researchers found five categories related to teacher professional development, and the teachers could have a deeper understanding of their experience.

Regarding studies on critical incidents in general education, Yu (2018) investigated the professional development experience of in-service teachers who mostly taught Religious and Moral Education through the use of critical incidents with a small group of peers. The researcher found that the teachers participated more in the professional development. After reflecting on their personal stories, they had better self-understanding and attained self-cure and relief. Additionally, Voulgari and Koutroba (2021) examined the primary teachers' depth of reflections through the critical incident technique and the factors that showed a higher reflection level in Greece. Most of the teachers' reflection level was at the Rationalisation Level, while a small number of teachers showed their reflective capacity. They found that teachers' education level and depth of reflection had a statistically significant relationship.

The scholars argue that future researchers should conduct a study to investigate how teachers reflect on their practices by considering that teachers' reflection can vary according to the different beliefs they hold, school contexts and culture (Agnihotri et al., 2024). Regarding teachers' reflection on critical incidents, Farrell (2008) states that only a few studies focusing on teachers' critical incidents have been conducted in the ELT literature although analysing critical incidents has gained popularity in the field of general education. Zolotarev et al. (2025) suggest that future researchers should explore whether TESOL teachers who are in similar educational systems have similar critical incidents and use coping strategies. Additionally, Wijaya and Kuswando (2018) recommend that future research should be conducted by facilitating the teachers to reflect on their critical incidents with more frequencies while engaging in self-reflection and group reflection.

Based on the literature review, very few studies have focused on EFL teachers' reflection on their practices, particularly their critical incidents as professional development, while engaging in two rounds of self-reflection

and online group reflection. Prior research has examined a considerable number of studies on teachers’ reflective practice by conducting quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies (e.g., Kaung, 2020; Ahmed, 2014; Gudeta, 2022). However, there has been a handful of studies that have examined EFL teachers’ reflection on critical incidents as their professional development in the field of ELT literature (e.g., Farrell, 2013; Wijaya & Kuswandono, 2018). Bearing in mind the above factors, the current study will fill those gaps by investigating EFL teachers’ reflective practice experiences through reflecting on critical incidents while engaging in two rounds of self-reflection and group reflection virtually as their professional development in Myanmar.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

In order to investigate EFL teachers’ reflective practice experiences through reflecting on critical incidents as their professional development in Myanmar, the narrative inquiry method was used. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) defined the narrative inquiry as “collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus.” The narrative inquiry can record significant human life events and uncover the whole context and the relationship between them. This makes life stories worthwhile for conducting research (Webster & Metrova, 2007).

### Data Collection

In this study, snowball sampling was applied to recruit three EFL teachers, who taught primary and lower secondary levels from the politically affected rural areas and had at least two years of teaching experience in English language teaching. Snowball sampling is a sampling technique that researchers use a few resource persons to get in touch with other participants who will participate in the research (Cohen et al., 2018). The background information of the participant teachers is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Teachers’ Background Information

School Category	Pseudonym	Gender	Teaching experience	Qualification	Teaching Level
Middle School	Teacher A	Male	9 years	BSc(Zoo;), PPTT	Lower Secondary
Middle School	Teacher B	Female	8 years	BSc(Math;), PPTT	Primary
High School	Teacher C	Female	5 years	MSc(Geo;)	Lower Secondary

Note: BSc: Bachelor of Science, MSc: Master of Science, PPTT: Pre-service Primary Teacher Training

The data were collected from the teachers by engaging in self-reflections via narrative frames, online group reflections, and semi-structured interviews for two weeks. The narrative frame for self-reflection (see Table 2), which was adapted from Nejadghanbar and Mohammadi (2024) and Richards and Farrell (2010), and semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. For the narrative frame, Thiel’s (1999) four steps in the conceptualization of critical incidents were followed. These four steps are “self-observation”, “recounting what happened”, “self-awareness” and “self-evaluation” (cited in Nejadghanbar & Mohammadi, 2024).

Before the self-reflection and group reflection activities, the researcher gave a short presentation session to understand the meaning of a critical incident, the narrative framework for self-reflection, and how to conduct group reflection via Zoom. For self-reflections, they were asked to write an incident (a teaching high/ a teaching low) by using the narrative frame on paper and send it via the Telegram app. For group reflections, they were asked to share their self-reflections to other two teachers in the group of three, and their peers gave feedback to them. After conducting reflections, the participants were interviewed by using the guiding questions (see Table

3). The researcher also had to consult with one teacher to give more details about one of the incidents described and shared.

Table 2. The Narrative Frame for Self-reflection

Steps for Self-reflection	Guided Questions
After reflecting on your experience as an EFL teacher, a particular incident (a teaching low/a teaching high) stands out in your memory. Describe a detailed description of the incident.	What happened directly before, during and after the event? (Who? When? What? Where?)
Describe the reason/s behind the incident.	Why was this incident significant to you?
Describe your specific reaction to the incident.	How did you react at the time of the event?
Describe your students' reaction to the incident.	How did your students react at the time of the event?
Describe a valuable lesson for you that you gained from the incident.	What underlying assumptions about your teaching does the incident raise for you?

Source: Adapted from Nejadhanbar and Mohammadi (2024); Richards and Farrell (2010)

Table 3. Guiding Questions for the Semi-structured Interviews

Guiding Questions
1. What do you learn from reflection activities?  What do you learn from self-reflection using the narrative frame?  What do you learn from group reflection using the narrative frame?
2. How does reflection on your critical incident affect your teaching and learning?

### Data Analysis

The data were analysed by using the thematic analysis method. Baraun and Clarke (2006) define “Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79). In this study, data from self-reflections and group reflections, and interview data were analysed by using six phases of analysis for thematic analysis guided by Baraun and Clarke (2006): “familiarizing yourself with your data”, “generating initial codes”, “searching for themes”, “reviewing themes”, “defining and naming themes”, and “producing the report”.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

The key findings from the data analysis are presented in three sections, which consist of themes that emerged from thematic analysis: significant critical incidents, initial emotional responses, and learning experiences in professional development.

### Significant Critical Incidents

According to the data analysis, six significant critical incidents were identified from the EFL teachers' teaching low or teaching high experiences. These critical incidents concerned mismatch between lesson objective and

teaching practice, refusal to learn the lesson, difficulty in pronunciation, fear or shyness of speaking English, active student participation, and encouraging students' inquiries.

### **Mismatch between Lesson Objective and Teaching Practice**

In the first self-reflection and group reflection, Teacher A reported on an incident regarding the mismatch between lesson objective and his actual teaching practice. He said that the incident occurred when he taught Grade 6 students the lesson: "Where are you from?" He had planned the lesson in advance. When he entered the classroom, he taught students grammar, including affirmative, negative, and interrogative sentences. He reported that he did not fully consider the low language proficiency level of Grade 6 students. At first, he explained that he taught sentence constructions to students, for example, I (subject) am (verb to be) from Japan (prepositional phrase). He continued:

Based on my teaching experience, the students should have already learnt some sentence constructions. If they have not already learnt some of these basic structures, it is not great for learning other grammar structures. At first, students could tell subject, verb, and object, but then, they do not know "manner, place, and time". They said, "MPT, MPT, MPT, let's make a call." Here, the situation became complicated, and it was far from achieving my learning objective.

He also discovered that there were some sleepy students, but others were staring outside or watching him without understanding what he was saying. In this case, he realised that he could not continue the lesson. He continued:

Then, I changed my teaching content. I switched the teaching activity from teaching grammar to another activity, as I had prepared national flags in advance. I asked, "How many countries are there in ASEAN?" Even the sleepy students responded to eight, nine, or ten countries. I showed the world map and explained that there were ten countries. You know, now, there are eleven member countries in ASEAN. After that, I used the flags and asked them to identify countries. One student would say the name of the country, and another would come and pick the correct flag. After changing this activity, the class became more active, but I did not achieve my intended lesson objective.

He remarked that reflecting back, this incident happened due to the irrelevance of his teaching and explanation to the students' low level of English proficiency. He said that the teachers, including him, wanted to share all the things that students should know, and as a result, the lesson period was beyond the time limit.

### **Refusal to Learn the Lesson**

In the second round of reflections, Teacher A explained his teaching experience, including a negative critical incident: the refusal to learn the lesson. This incident happened during the 2022-2023 academic year. The teacher described that, as the lesson was the second part of the previous day's lesson, he asked students some questions related to the first part of the lesson, while walking around the classroom. He continued:

After five minutes, a loud voice suddenly interrupted: "Teacher, teacher, teacher, can't we skip this part?" I was momentarily surprised and confused. A female student said, "I don't want to learn. If I am able to use a computer, what will I do?" She said, "My sister can't use the computer, but she is working abroad and can support the family with a lot of money." I felt that the situation had become serious. I was surprised again and even nervous. As a teacher, I told her that if she could use the computer, she could earn a great salary even in Myanmar instead of working abroad like her sister. I also said, "The more skillful in using a computer, the more money you can earn. If your parents or siblings are ill or do good deeds, you can take a leave from your job and come back home easily. ... So, would you like to skip the lesson?" She said, "No, Teacher."

He said that even though she complained about another reason why she did not want to learn, due to not learning with a real computer, she accepted learning the lesson, stopping her insistence on skipping the lesson. Moreover, he reported that their village was less developed than his, and so the schools had only limited teaching aids instead of real materials and equipment, such as computers. That is why the teachers faced challenges in teaching

and learning. He also said, “To sum up, I handled the situation by considering the causes of the issue and tried to solve it by connecting to real-life situations in a way students could accept.”

### **Difficulty in Pronunciation**

During her first self-reflection and group reflection, a critical incident reported by Teacher B was difficulty in pronunciation. The teacher noticed that the incident happened when she taught a lesson: It's to the east. She reported that the lesson started at 1:00PM when students came back to the class after having lunch. It was a listening activity called Listen, point and repeat. She said to her students, “First, you need to listen to the pronunciation and then point. After that, you repeat it.” She played the audio thrice using a Bluetooth speaker. Then she told her students, “Now you repeat.” She explained that in this way, the pronunciation was familiar to them. She stated:

Unexpectedly, when they listened to one of the neighbouring countries of Myanmar, Bangladesh, a problem arose. The students already knew that country name in Geography, but when they heard the sound from the audio, it was “Bang-gluh-desh / ˌbæŋ.ɡləˈdeʃ/”. Immediately, they started arguing, “It was wrong. It was wrong.” Thus, I played the audio not only from the Bluetooth speaker but also from my mobile phone English dictionary application to listen to the correct pronunciation, but it sounded like “Bang-gluh-desh / ˌbæŋ.ɡləˈdeʃ/”.

She reported that although some curious students strongly argued to know the correct pronunciation, others did not complain and accepted what she said. She continued:

Instead of arguing with some curious students, I told them in a humorous way, “We pronounced like this because we, Myanmar, eat ‘Ngapi (a fish paste) ’and so we have a ‘Ngapi ’accent. Moreover, English is not our mother tongue.” The students laughed and did not make any more arguments.

### **Fear or Shyness of Speaking English**

Another issue that was significant for Teacher B was the case of fear or shyness of speaking English. The teacher described the incident that happened when she taught Grade 4 students about clothing. As the lesson was a bit similar to that in Grade 2, she started the lesson by asking about their prior knowledge of wearing clothes. The students learnt the meanings in advance, and so they could read the dialogue well. Then, she acted in two roles as a speaker. She continued:

Next, I gave students instructions to practice the dialogue in pairs as examples in front of the class, just like in Grade 2. However, nobody came out and looked at each other. I thought that the reason may be due to their fear or shyness. They seemed less confident as they thought they might be wrong.

She said that to have more confidence in her students, she shared her personal experience of how she overcame her fear of speaking English in the training course she attended. She mentioned:

On the first day of the training course, the trainer asked all trainees to introduce themselves. Though most trainees introduced themselves to others, as for me, I felt nervous. I noticed that my hands and feet were cold and my heart was pounding loudly. Finally, I could overcome my fear by telling the other trainees, “Good morning, everybody. Let me introduce myself. My name is Teacher B. I live in ... My favourite colour is red.”

After that, she asked the class whether they could introduce themselves and practice the dialogue in pairs. She explained:

I told my students that although I was scared, I could introduce myself when I had to do so. During my childhood, I felt less confident and afraid due to a lack of practice in speaking English. We didn't have the chance to speak in pairs, and so all you need is courage. If you cannot speak to your friends in front of the class, how could you speak in front of a lot of people?

She mentioned that after a couple of seconds, two male and female students volunteered to speak in pairs in front of the class. Then, all the rest practiced the dialogue in pairs, and she supported some students who struggled by asking what they wanted to say and guiding them on how to express it. She said that finally, she could support her students to speak confidently, overcoming the fear of speaking English.

### Active Student Participation

The incident that was vividly still in the memory of Teacher C was the case of students' active participation. She said that she was more interested in teaching environment lessons since her background was related to the environment before she worked as a teacher. Because of her background, she could search for more information and facts when she taught environment lessons in Grade 8.

During the lesson, she facilitated her students' learning the reasons why people must protect the environment and how to save the Earth by using the six students' actions. They actively discussed that they had burned the rubbish whenever they cleaned in the school compound, but they promised her that they would follow the 3Rs: Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle to protect the environmental pollution. She continued:

After the lesson, the first unexpected action that students could do is the collection of rubbish on the village road, including plastic bottles. Even though there were ten students, they collected garbage on Fridays. Moreover, they decided who would collect it from which part of the village. They also gave me instructions on which team I should cooperate with in collecting, as there were only two female students. You know, it was an amazing experience for me as they improved their teamwork and cooperation among team members. After collecting, they divided the garbage into reusable and non-reusable. They sold collected plastic bottles to fund their team. Instead of burning leaves, they put them in a hole under the ground to get natural fertilizers for their plants.

### Encouraging Students' Inquiries

Teacher C explained another teaching high experience as a significant incident. She said that before the incident happened, I was teaching four natural features from "Beautiful Myanmar" in Grade 8. She downloaded pictures of these features on her mobile phone as teaching aids and connected the lesson with students' geographical background knowledge. She continued:

During the lesson, students learnt about Sadan Cave, its location, and what is inside and outside the cave. They asked me, "Teacher, have you been there?" I said, "No, I haven't, but I have been to Peik Chin Myaung Cave, one of the most famous caves in Myanmar." They asked me, "What's inside, Teacher?" I could explain them with my geological knowledge, "It is a cave that is formed from limestone ( $\text{CaCO}_3$ ). The rainwater mixed with carbon dioxide ( $\text{CO}_2$ ) eroded  $\text{CaCO}_3$  and created the cave naturally ... That is why we can see wall carvings and beautiful columns of rocks hanging from the roof." She thought that she could support her students' inquiry by using her strong content knowledge of Geology."

Unexpectedly, the students still inquired about geological features such as valleys, faults, volcanoes, ... and how they are formed after the class. I could apply my specialized knowledge in explaining them. She said, "They even told me that we learnt those facts and areas in detail, and when they grew up, they would like to specialize in my major." After the event and hearing this, she felt that the unexpected event was a teaching high during her teaching career. She also noted that:

In the past, students were not allowed to inquire and had to only listen. Now, I allow them to discuss and inquire in the class. If they ask the questions and participate actively in the class, I always praise their performance.

She remarked that when the teachers had strong geological content knowledge in teaching English, they could support students' inquiry and cultivate the love of nature and geology more while learning English.

## Initial Emotional Responses

Regarding initial emotional responses, the teachers reported feelings at the time of critical incidents were both positive and negative. Their initial emotional responses were dissatisfaction, surprise, nervousness, confusion, satisfaction, happiness, and amazement.

In this study, two of the participant teachers felt dissatisfied with their events. Regarding his first critical incident, Teacher A said, “I finished my class by managing the current situation as much as I could. In short, I was not satisfied. ... I taught the lesson again and again in my mind.” Teacher B also had dissatisfaction with her incident in the classroom. She noted, “I felt dissatisfied with my teaching due to my weakness in teaching English, particularly pronunciation.”

Moreover, Teacher A was surprised, confused and nervous when he heard his student’s question of whether they could skip the lesson, and her explanation of the incident. He reported that his female student said she did not want to learn the lesson and asked him if she could use a computer, what she would do. He felt that the situation became serious when he heard her explanation that her sister could not use the computer, but she was working abroad and could support the family with a lot of money. He was surprised again and even more nervous.

On the other hand, all three participants had positive feelings about their critical incidents. Teacher A said that he was very satisfied with his incident, turning from unexpected into a memorable event because he could continue teaching the lesson effectively and guide students concerning their life goals. Moreover, Teacher B described feeling satisfied with her support for her students to speak English confidently, overcoming their fear or shyness. She said, “I was satisfied with my action because I could teach my students not only by connecting the lesson with the previous one but also by building confidence in speaking English by overcoming their fear or shyness.”

In addition, in her interviews and reflections, Teacher C felt happy, satisfied, and amazed with her incidents. She reported feeling happy, satisfied, and amazed in her interviews and reflections. She said that she felt happy as she was also involved in collecting garbage around the village together with her students. She also stated that she felt satisfied when she saw her students’ improvement in team management skills in collecting garbage around the village every Friday. In her group reflection, she also explained, “Before and during the lesson, I felt satisfaction. Unexpectedly, after the class, their cooperation in a team, how they managed in the team, and did environmental protection activities practically gave me an amazing experience and feeling.” Additionally, in her second incident, she also felt satisfaction as she could apply her specialized knowledge in explaining geological features that students inquired.

## Learning Experiences in Professional Development

According to the data analysis, six sub-themes related to learning experiences in professional development emerged from participation in self-reflection and group reflection activities. These sub-themes are lifelong learning, learning from collaboration, developing reflective thinking, reflection-for-action, emotional support, and need for reflective practice as professional development.

### Life-long Learning

The results showed that two teachers emphasized that they were required to learn throughout their lives as lifelong learners. Teacher A said, “According to the saying: A teacher is a life-long learner, we always need to learn and prepare. ... What I learnt from being involved in reflection activities is “Learn! Prepare! Study!” Teacher B also said, “... As a teacher, we need to learn throughout our lives. ...” Teacher C learnt a lot about strategies to solve problems related to teaching and learning, while involving group reflections. She said that it was continuous learning for her, reminding her to learn more about teaching. She explained, “... I learnt a lot about how to solve problems. After sharing teaching high and teaching low experiences in group reflection, I think it is continuous learning for me. It reminds me to learn more and do more for teaching ...”

## Learning from Collaboration

The results indicated that teachers were aware of their needs and weaknesses, learnt new teaching activities and approaches, as well as the connection of concepts and grammar structures throughout the Grade levels.

After discussing, we are aware of our needs and weaknesses from the comments and suggestions of others. I think, instead of thinking alone, with the collaboration effort of colleagues, we can prepare our teaching perfectly. ...we learnt new teaching activities and approaches by sharing our experiences with each other. ... We can also fill our gaps or weaknesses with other teachers' strengths. (Teacher A)

From our group reflections, I learnt that teachers need to teach students the lessons by connecting with previous knowledge and skills as the concepts and grammar structures in primary levels are related to those in higher levels. (Teacher B)

... I learnt from other teachers' experiences that even though we must have a lesson plan, in the real classroom, it might not happen like the one we prepared in advance. If we faced problems like this, we would have to solve these problems by using our experiences and abilities. (Teacher C)

## Developing Reflective Thinking

This research found that the participant teacher had a good habit of thinking while doing self-reflections and participating in group reflections.

When I was writing self-reflection, I had to write and share my experiences, and I had to think back on how I solved problems in the classroom. ... While I was involved in discussions, I learnt other teachers' critical incidents and have a good habit of thinking: if I were in their teaching situation, what I would do, for example, I would treat children in other ways and give the logical reasons that they could accept. ... (Teacher A)

## Reflection-for-action

In this study, it was found that the participants aimed for solving problems in future critical incidents, teaching them to have a strong foundation in English and using their experiences and abilities to solve problems in the future.

... If I faced the problems, I would solve them with strategies that are a mix of my colleagues' solutions and mine, using my critical thinking and problem-solving skills. I totally believe that I can solve problems in my future critical incidents. (Teacher A)

Teacher B said, "From the group reflection, I gained the lesson that as I have been teaching English to young learners, I have to teach them to have a strong foundation in English for Secondary Level in future lessons." Teacher C also said, "... If we faced problems like this, we would have to solve these problems by using our experiences and abilities."

## Emotional Support

This study also found that the participant felt relaxed after sharing his critical incident with others. He became more confident as he was not alone who faced challenges in his teaching. Instead of feeling depressed, he saw the challenges as opportunities to learn and find solutions. That is why he was motivated in his teaching career. Teacher A stated:

...I feel relaxed after sharing my critical incidents about teaching in the classrooms that were locked in my heart. ... After discussing our teaching highs and teaching lows that included critical incidents with each other as a group reflection, I feel much more confident because I know that the person who has faced struggles is not only me; we have our own issues in teaching. ...I also recognise that other teachers have their own difficulties depending on the situation, and so instead of feeling depressed, I see these as

opportunities to learn and think about how to find the solutions. If so, I gain motivation for my teaching journey.

### **Need for Reflective Practice as Professional Development**

The results showed that the participants were aware of the need for collaboration and discussions with colleagues about critical incidents in the future and wanted to be more involved in self-reflections and group reflections. Teacher A shared:

Self-reflection and group-reflection should be done in our teaching sector. In our school, I told our school committee to hold a discussion activity under the leadership of experienced teachers to improve our teaching. ... After participating in reflections, I gained lots of lessons and experiences that are useful and practical to my teaching career. ... as I mentioned before, if we can do self-reflection and group reflection like this a lot, it can be hugely beneficial to our teaching.

Teacher C also stated:

I have a weakness in collaboration with colleagues in my school. In a normal situation, we do not share and discuss our teaching experiences. ... From the group reflection activity, I learnt that I should collaborate and discuss with my colleagues about our critical incidents related to teaching and learning positively in the future.

## **DISCUSSION**

This research was conducted to highlight the significant critical incidents that EFL teachers in Myanmar identify in the process of reflection, identify their initial emotional responses at the time of critical incidents, and examine their learning experiences by reflecting on critical incidents.

First of all, the results of this study showed that six significant critical incidents emerged from reflecting on the EFL teachers' teaching low or teaching high experiences. These critical incidents were mismatch between lesson objective and teaching practice, refusal to learn the lesson, difficulty in pronunciation, fear or shyness of speaking English, active student participation, and encouraging students' inquiries. Among these incidents, four of them were from participant teachers' teaching highs and the rest two incidents were from their teaching lows. The findings related to four critical incidents from their teaching highs and teaching lows are confirmed by the results of the previous studies conducted by scholars (Farrell, 2008; Nejadghanbar & Mohammadi, 2024; Voulgari & Koutrouba, 2021). Farrell's (2008) study showed that "class participation" and "lesson objectives" were among the categories that ELT trainee teachers described as their critical incidents, but these incidents were more focused on negative issues. Nejadghanbar and Mohammadi (2024) found that some of the English for specific purposes practitioners' critical incidents were centred on "difficulty in pronunciation". Voulgari and Koutrouba (2021) also found refusal of students for participating in the classroom as one of the critical incidents that some of primary school teachers in Greece described. However, this study found that active student participation and encouraging students' inquiries were critical incidents from one of the teachers' teaching highs.

In addition, Cope and Watts (2000) argued that the self-reported critical incident is "an emotional event, in that it represents a period of intense feelings, both at the time and during its subsequent reflective interpretation." The results of this narrative inquiry study revealed that on the one hand, the participants felt dissatisfied, surprised, nervous and confused at the time of critical incidents. These negative emotional responses are aligned with the research findings of international studies (Bruster & Peterson, 2013; Voulgari & Koutrouba, 2021). These studies found that the participants reported that they were embarrassed, panic, surprised, anxious and confused when their critical incidents occurred. Cope and Watts (2000) also stated that in a number of interviews, the respondents described critical incidents that were accompanied by high emotions, feeling angry, confused, or hassled.

On the other hand, this study found that teachers were satisfied, happy and amazed in their critical incidents regarding "teaching highs". According to the well-being theory by Seligman (2011), positive emotion can lead

to an individual's well-being as it is one of the five key elements of well-being. Moreover, Jennings and Greenberg (2009) stated that teachers' well-being has a direct impact on their classroom management, teaching and relationships, which can lead to their students' well-being and academic achievement. Therefore, in this study, the participants' positive emotional responses at the time of critical incidents can have a positive impact on their well-being and their teaching profession.

According to Farrell (2013), teachers can better understand the experiences that they encounter in their teaching by analysing critical incidents as "they hold the real inside knowledge, especially personal intuitive knowledge, expertise and experience that is based on their accumulated years as language educators teaching in schools and classrooms." This study found that the participants learnt and gained insight about teaching and learning from analysing their critical incidents by sharing their teaching low or teaching high experiences while involving in self-reflections and group reflections virtually with their critical friends' feedback.

Turning to their learning experiences, this study found that after participating in self-reflection and group reflection activities virtually, the teachers emphasised the need to learn throughout their lives as lifelong learners, and learning problem-solving strategies for teaching in their group reflections as continuous learning for them. The result of this study is similar to that of the research done by Wijaya and Kuswandono (2018). Some participants in their study mentioned that as teachers, they needed to learn continuously as lifelong learners. Because of the critical incidents encountered, one participant in their study realized that she was not smart and required to keep learning to develop herself as a teacher. The result of this study seems to be consistent with other study, which found that through reflections with critical friendships, the participant stated that he grew professionally as a teacher and was still a life-long learner (Kelley et al., 2022).

The findings from this study indicated that teachers were aware of their needs and weaknesses, learnt new teaching practices and gained experiences from group reflections with their critical friends. The results are consistent with the study of Kelley et al. (2022). In their narrative inquiry research study, they found that collaboration with colleagues through group reflection influenced the participants' practices in depth, and they gained insights from their colleagues' thinking and learning.

Additionally, this research revealed that the participant teacher had a good habit of thinking during reflections as he thought back on the way he solved problems and thought alternative solutions concerned with other teachers' critical incidents. The teachers in this study could also plan for solving problems in future classrooms and prepare for their future teaching based on their experiences and abilities after reflection activities. The results are in line with the study of Bruster and Peterson (2013), who examined the student teachers' use of critical incidents as a reflective tool during their clinical teaching. They stated that using the critical incident technique promoted their reflective practice and critical thinking.

Furthermore, this study found that sharing and discussing teaching lows or teaching highs involving critical incidents helped the teacher to feel relaxed, be more confident and motivated in their teaching. This finding seems to be consistent with previous studies which found that the teachers were relieved and felt more empowered owing to their professional development of reflecting on critical incidents (Farrell, 2008; Yu, 2018).

Finally, in terms of further need for reflective practice as professional development, the result of this research also showed that through participating in self-reflections and group reflections, the participant wanted to do these activities in his school as they were useful and practical, and another participant was aware to collaborate and discuss with her colleagues about critical incidents in the future. The result is confirmed by Kelley et al.'s (2022) finding that keeping journals in a portfolio made the participant learn new things, and collaboration with critical friendships in group reflection was useful and rewarding for their teaching and students' learning, looking for more collaboration.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, reflection has been an essential practice in English language teaching and language teachers' professional development. This research project has been done to investigate EFL teachers' reflective practice experiences through reflecting on critical incidents as their professional development in Myanmar.

According to the thematic analysis, this study found that EFL teachers' significant critical incidents emerged from reflecting their teaching lows or teaching highs were mismatch between lesson objective and teaching practice, refusal to learn the lesson, difficulty in pronunciation, fear or shyness of speaking English, active student participation, and encouraging students' inquiries. Thus, although EFL teachers in this study are in the same educational system, it was found that they reported different critical incidents from their teaching lows and teaching highs.

In terms of initial emotional responses, the teachers' feelings were both positive and negative regarding their critical incidents. Their negative emotional responses at the time of critical incidents were dissatisfaction, surprise, nervousness and confusion, while satisfaction, happiness, and amazement were positive emotional responses that they stated.

In addition, when teachers reflect on critical incidents, they can gain new understanding about teaching and learning (Nazari & De Costa, 2022). The participant teachers in this study explained the learning experiences that they gained from reflections on their critical incidents. They recognized the need to learn continuously as lifelong learners. They were also aware of their needs and weaknesses while learning new teaching practices from online group reflection activities. Moreover, they developed their reflective thinking concerned with their teaching practices and could plan for teaching in the future.

Furthermore, this study found that one of the participants felt relaxed after sharing the incidents that were locked in his heart, while being more confident as he was not alone in facing challenges in teaching. Interestingly, he wanted to do reflections in his own school because these reflection activities were practical and useful. Other participant also had awareness to collaborate with colleagues and discuss critical incidents positively in the future.

This small-scale research also has some limitations. First, only a few EFL teachers participated in this qualitative research. In addition, snowball sampling was used in order to get the required data. Finally, all three participants who taught English to students were from the politically affected rural areas. Thus, the research results might not fully cover all EFL teachers' reflective practice experiences in Myanmar while reflecting on their critical incidents.

Therefore, future research should involve a larger number of EFL teachers from different educational settings to improve the representativeness and applicability of findings. Future researchers should also adopt mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative reflections with quantitative measures of teacher development and classroom effectiveness. Moreover, further study should be conducted with more frequent reflection through the use of critical incidents that focus on positive and negative issues or by using other reflective tools in order to understand their reflection in depth. Extending the duration of reflective practice activities would also allow for a better understanding of long-term professional growth and behavioural change.

Reflecting teaching highs or teaching lows by engaging in self-reflection and (face-to-face or online) group-reflection activities can provide EFL teachers opportunities to share their critical incidents with colleagues, learn from each other's incidents and prepare for their teaching practices in the future. Furthermore, under the management of school principals, and guidance of subject leaders and experienced teachers, self-reflections and (face-to-face or online) group reflections should be carried out because these activities have a lot of benefits for teachers and school administrators. As for EFL teachers, they can grow personally and professionally by participating in reflection activities even if they work in far-flung areas where there is a lack of resources and very few opportunities for their professional development.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my special thanks to three EFL teachers who enthusiastically participated in this research study and their school principals who allowed them to involve in this study.

## REFERENCES

1. Agnihotri, S., Mamoria, P., Moorthygari, S. L., Chandel, P., & Raju, S. G. (2024). The role of reflective practice in enhancing teacher efficacy. *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(6), 1689–1696. <https://doi.org/10.53555/kuey.v30i6.5574>
2. Ahmed, W. M. A. (2014). *Exploring reflective practice among university English teachers in Yemen: A case study* [Doctoral dissertation, Universiti Utara Malaysia].
3. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
4. Bruster, B. G., & Peterson, B. R. (2013). Using critical incidents in teaching to promote reflective practice. *Reflective Practice*, 14(2), 170–182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2012.732945>
5. Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.
6. Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education*. Routledge.
7. Cope, J., & Watts, G. (2000). Learning by doing—An exploration of experience, critical incidents and reflection in entrepreneurial learning. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research*, 6(3), 104–124. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13552550010346208>
8. Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. D.C. Heath.
9. Farrell, T. S. C. (2008). Critical incidents in ELT initial teacher training. *ELT Journal*, 62(1), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccm072>
10. Farrell, T. S. C. (2013). Critical incident analysis through narrative reflective practice: A case study. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*, 1(1), 79–89.
11. Farrell, T. S. C. (2024). *Reflective practice for language teachers*. Cambridge University Press.
12. Gudeta, D. (2022). Professional development through reflective practice: The case of Addis Ababa secondary school EFL in-service teachers. *Cogent Education*, 9(1), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2022.2030076>
13. Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, 79, 491–525. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308325693>
14. Kaung, P. P. (2020). *A study of teachers' reflective teaching practices on students' academic achievement in Myanmar* [Master's thesis, KDI School].
15. Kelley, M., Curtis, G. A., Craig, C. J., Reid, D., & Easley, A. (2022). Reflection through critical friendship: Promoting growth of teachers. *Frontiers in Education*. 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.1056471>
16. Maliha, H. A., & Noordin, N. (2025). Reflecting on critical incidents: Shaping English teacher identity and sustainable professional development. [Paper presentation]. *International Graduate Research in Education Seminar 2025 (i-GREduc 2025)*, Universiti Putra Malaysia.
17. Ministry of Education (2020). *Teacher competency standards framework (TCSF)*. <https://mmteacherplatform.net/en/elibrary/resource/teacher-competency-standards-framework-tcsf>
18. Ministry of Education (2023). *National Education Strategic Plan (2021-2030): Summary*. <https://www.moe.gov.mm/sites/default/files/NESP%202021-2030Eng.pdf>
19. Nazari, M., & De Costa, P. I. (2022). Contributions of a professional development course to language teacher identity development: Critical incidents in focus. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 73(4), 366–380. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00224871211059160>
20. Nejadghanbar, H. (2021). Using critical incidents for professional development with Iranian novice English teachers. *TESOL Journal*, 12(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.521>
21. Nejadghanbar, H., Hu, G., & Mohammadi, M. (2024). Exploring Iranian ESP teachers' language-related critical incidents. *Ibérica*, (47), 175–200. <https://doi.org/10.17398/2340-2784.47.175>
22. Osterman, K. F., & Kottkamp, R. B. (1993). *Reflective practice for educators: Improving schooling through professional development*. Corwin Press.
23. Pinnegar, S., & Lay, C. D. (2023). Editorial: The role of reflection in teacher and teacher educator development. *Frontiers in Education*, 8, 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1225168>

24. Richards, J. C., & Farrell, T. S. C. (2010). *Professional development for language teachers*. Cambridge: CUP.
25. Rodgers, C. (2002). Defining reflection: Another look at John Dewey and reflective thinking. *Teachers College Record*, 104(4), 842–866. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9620.00181>
26. Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.
27. Seligman, M. E. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. Simon and Schuster.
28. Steffy, B. E., Wolfe, M. P., Pasch, S. H., & Enz, B. J. (2000). *Life cycle of the career teacher*. Corwin Press.
29. Voulgari, R., & Koutrouba, K. (2021). Examining the depth of primary school teachers' reflection through the critical incident technique. *Educational Studies*, 50(5), 640–658. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2021.1980863>
30. Webster, L., & Mertova, P. (2007). *Using narrative inquiry as a research method: An introduction to using critical event narrative analysis in research on learning and teaching*. Routledge.
31. Wijaya, A. R. T., & Kuswandono, P. (2018). Reflecting critical incident as a form of English teachers' professional development: An Indonesian narrative inquiry research. *IJEE (Indonesian Journal of English Education)*, 5(2), 101–118. <https://doi.org/10.15408/ijee.v5i2.10923>
32. York-Barr, J., Sommers, W. A., Ghere, G. S. & Montie, J. (2001). *Reflective practice to improve schools: An action guide for educators*. Corwin Press.
33. Yu, W. M. (2018). Critical incidents as a reflective tool for professional development: An experience with in-service teachers. *Reflective Practice*, 19(6), 763–776.
34. Zolotarev, M., Bots, T., Nikitina, G., Shilova, S., & Alexeeva, D. (2025). Through the looking glass of critical incidents: Examining reflective practices of experienced and novice TESOL teachers. *TESL-EJ*, 29(2), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.55593/ej.29114s6>