

Investigating the Effects of Self-Evaluation (SE) versus Reflective Thinking (RT) on Mindful Language Learning among Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners

Farkhondeh Sha'bani¹, Abbas Pourhosein Gilakjani¹ *

¹Department of English Language Translation, La. C., Islamic Azad University, Lahijan, Iran

Corresponding Author's Email: abbas.pourhosein@iau.ac.ir

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ABSTRACT

Success in foreign language learning depends not only on linguistic skill but also on learners' cognitive and emotional resources, yet how metacognitive strategies foster mindful learning remains underexplored. This quasi-experimental, pretest–posttest control-group study compared the effects of reflective thinking (RT) and self-evaluation (SE) on academic mindfulness, subjective well-being, and productive language performance among Iranian intermediate EFL learners. Using purposive sampling, 90 learners at Islamic Azad University, Lahijan, Iran, were assigned to three groups of 30: an RT group following Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988), an SE group using TOEFL iBT–based checklists, and a control group receiving conventional instruction. Over eight weeks, participants completed pre- and post-tests of academic mindfulness (AMQ-5), subjective well-being (CSSWQ), and TOEFL iBT–scored speaking and writing. Data were analyzed using one-way ANCOVA with Tukey's HSD comparisons. Both interventions produced significant, large gains over the control group on all outcomes. The two strategies were comparable on most measures and differed significantly only on writing, where self-evaluation outperformed reflective thinking. These findings indicated that both strategies are effective routes to self-regulated language learning, with self-evaluation especially beneficial for writing; teachers may combine reflective journaling and structured self-evaluation to strengthen learners' productive language skills.

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Introduction

The expanding global role of English has produced a steady rise in the number of Iranian learners who study it as a foreign language (Davari, 2013), yet the difficulties that shape their learning experiences remain insufficiently examined. Language learning depends not only on linguistic competencies such as grammar, listening, and speaking, but also on sociolinguistic and psychological factors, including prior knowledge, attitudes, personality, and motivation (Bagheri & Farhani, 2022). Understanding how learners plan, monitor, and engage with learning tasks, how they deploy cognition and metacognition, is therefore essential.

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Several interrelated yet distinct constructs underpin this process. Metacognition refers to learners' awareness and regulation of their own thinking. Self-regulation extends this awareness to the goal-directed control of cognition, behavior, and affect during learning, while emotional regulation concerns the management of the affective states that can support or hinder it. Mindfulness, nonjudgmental attention to present-moment experience (Kabat-Zinn, 1982), can be understood as a metacognitive and affective capacity that supports both self-regulation and emotional regulation by reducing reactivity and sharpening attention. Distinguishing these constructs is important because the strategies examined in this study are assumed to act on mindfulness through different combinations of these processes.

For Iranian learners, psychological pressures such as stress and difficulty concentrating have been associated with reduced motivation and lower academic confidence in some studies, although the strength of these effects varies across individuals and learning contexts. Mindfulness-based approaches, first introduced in clinical settings by Kabat-Zinn (1982) to relieve stress and regulate emotion, have since been adapted in education to enhance emotional stability and psychological well-being. By anchoring attention in the present moment, mindfulness can support academic performance and may facilitate more effective language acquisition. It can be cultivated through formal practices, such as breathing and body-scan exercises, and through informal practices embedded in daily activity; the latter appear especially beneficial for students, easing tension and promoting engagement. Among Iranian learners specifically, mindful language learning has been linked to greater resilience, self-fulfillment, and motivation (Ghanizadeh et al., 2019), suggesting that integrating it into university curricula could benefit both learners and teachers (Sheikhzadeh & Khatami, 2017).

Two metacognitive strategies are central to fostering mindful language learning: reflective thinking and self-evaluation. Reflective thinking, which originates with Dewey (1910), involves the careful, persistent examination of one's beliefs and knowledge and encourages critical reflection and informed decision-making (Farrell, 2018). It is typically cultivated through qualitative means such as journaling, in which learners revisit past experiences in order to improve future performance.

Self-evaluation, by contrast, asks learners to judge their own learning against explicit criteria, often using structured tools such as checklists or rubrics (Boud & Falchikov, 1989), and can strengthen motivation, autonomy, and self-directed learning. It is most effective when it yields an honest and accurate appraisal of learners' strengths and weaknesses. Core self-evaluation, which encompasses traits such as self-esteem and emotional stability, appears to promote mindfulness and reduce rumination, thereby easing anxiety.

These two strategies are thought to foster mindfulness through different mechanisms, which is precisely what motivates the present comparison. Reflective thinking may promote mindfulness chiefly by enhancing metacognitive awareness and emotional regulation, encouraging nonjudgmental attention, and strengthening cognitive control processes such as inhibition (Blanke et al., 2019); because these qualities align closely with the present-moment, nonreactive stance that defines mindfulness, reflective thinking would be expected to produce the larger gains in academic mindfulness.

Self-evaluation, in turn, increases self-awareness and helps learners align their behavior with personal values and goals, which supports emotional regulation and well-being (Klussman et al., 2020); because it provides concrete benchmarks of progress and success, it may more directly strengthen learners' sense of competence and, in turn, their subjective well-being. Consistent with these mechanisms, mindfulness has been shown to reduce the fear of negative evaluation and to curb automatic negative thoughts, and reflective and evaluative practices have been found to strengthen planning, feedback processing, and emotional regulation in language learning.

Despite growing interest in mindfulness within education, little research has directly compared how reflective thinking and self-evaluation foster mindful language learning, and even less has been done among Iranian intermediate learners, for whom anxiety frequently undermines motivation and focus (Tahernezhad et al., 2014). Previous work has tended to examine mindfulness, reflection, or self-evaluation in isolation and to document the benefits of each, leaving unresolved whether the two strategies differ in their effects and, if so, for which specific outcomes.

Clarifying this matters in practice, because instructors working under time constraints must decide which strategy to prioritize for a given instructional goal. The present study, therefore, addresses this gap by comparing the effects of reflective thinking and self-evaluation on academic mindfulness, subjective well-being, and speaking and writing proficiency among Iranian intermediate learners of English, to clarify how each strategy shapes learners' psychological and academic development.

Literature Review

Mindfulness

The term mindfulness derives from the Pāli word *sati* and the Sanskrit *smṛti*, both of which denote “to remember” (Norman, 1988). Early references to *smṛti* in Vedic texts such as the *Ṛgveda* concerned awareness of the present moment, an idea the Buddha later developed into systematic contemplative practice (Shaw, 2020). Anālayo (2020) characterizes mindfulness as a historical synthesis of memory, attention, and moral awareness. Later, mindfulness gained prominence in the 1970s through Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program, which proved effective in reducing tension and chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn, 1982). Kabat-Zinn defined it as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4), a formulation that made the construct accessible to secular audiences. Critics, however, contend that contemporary adaptations have commodified mindfulness, privileging productivity at the expense of its ethical and spiritual foundations (Heffernan, 2015).

Mindfulness contributes to both cognitive and emotional development and draws on *vipassanā* (insight) and *samatha* (tranquility) meditation. It can be developed through formal practices, such as seated meditation and body scanning, and through informal practices, such as mindful walking or eating. Beyond the psychological domain, mindfulness-based interventions have been associated with physical-health benefits, including reduced chronic pain, through the

regulation of stress and enhanced emotional control linked to neural changes in the amygdala and prefrontal cortex (Creswell et al., 2019).

In educational settings, mindfulness has been found to reduce anxiety, improve emotional regulation, and enhance cognitive functioning (Kuroda et al., 2022). It lowers test-related anxiety and helps students sustain attention during language learning (Kuroda et al., 2022). Among Iranian EFL learners, it additionally promotes resilience, self-actualization, and motivation (Ghanizadeh et al., 2019), and classroom mindfulness training has been linked to higher academic achievement, lower anxiety, and improved emotional well-being (Sheikhzadeh & Khatami, 2017). Mindfulness also strengthens executive functions such as sustained attention and cognitive flexibility (Jha et al., 2007) and supports performance in high-pressure tasks such as public speaking by easing tension and aiding emotional regulation.

At the relational level, mindfulness can strengthen teacher–student relationships and foster a supportive, nonjudgmental classroom climate. Teachers who practice mindfulness report a greater capacity for emotional regulation and self-efficacy, which in turn benefits student learning and engagement (Beshai et al., 2016). Overall, mindfulness holds considerable potential for enhancing both emotional well-being and academic achievement, although further work is needed to standardize protocols, refine measurement, and clarify how mindfulness interacts with other instructional approaches.

Reflective Thinking

Reflective thinking is a central cognitive skill for deep learning, particularly in EFL contexts (Abrouq, 2024). It involves deliberately examining and evaluating experiences before, during, or after an event, an iterative process through which learners fold insights from past experience into strategies for future situations (Abrouq, 2024). Because it encompasses both intellectual and moral dimensions, this form of thinking encourages students to scrutinize the learning process critically. The concept originates with Dewey (1910), who first used the term and defined it as “an active, persistent, and careful examination of any belief or supposed form of knowledge” (p. 9). He identified three essential dispositions, open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and intellectual responsibility, which teachers can cultivate through action plans and regular progress reports (Taggart & Wilson, 2005).

This kind of thinking advances metacognitive awareness and self-regulation, a benefit that became especially salient in post-pandemic learning environments. Structured reflection deepens learning, supports affective regulation, and strengthens learner autonomy, which has prompted calls to embed reflective tools such as journals and portfolios into the curriculum. These tools cultivate student-driven insight and critical analysis, which help learners navigate complex educational demands. In one experimental study with 61 EFL learners, combining autonomous and self-reflective writing reduced anxiety and improved emotional regulation and learning outcomes relative to conventional instruction (Mall-Amiri, 2024).

Reflective thinking benefits both teachers and learners in teacher preparation. Schön (1983) distinguished reflection-in-action, adjusting one’s teaching during a lesson—from reflection-on-action, evaluating it afterward; both can improve lesson planning and instruction. Structured

frameworks such as Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988) further help teachers think critically and develop self-awareness (Suphasri & Chinokul, 2021). For students, these same processes deepen understanding, sharpen critical thinking, and build self-awareness, while techniques such as journals, feedback sessions, and peer discussion raise engagement and motivation and, in turn, improve problem-solving and academic performance (Kim, 2005).

Within EFL learning specifically, reflective thinking helps students refine their learning strategies and engage more deeply with language material (Farahian et al., 2021). It has been shown to enhance oral communication and writing, contributing to better academic performance (Afshar & Rahimi, 2015), and to yield cognitive benefits such as improved listening comprehension and reduced listening anxiety (Soodmand Afshar & Hamzavi, 2014).

A plausible mechanism for these productive-skill gains is the monitoring and revision that reflection entails: by reviewing their own output and planning improvements, learners exercise the self-regulatory processes that underpin the development of speaking and writing. For teachers, reflective practice is associated with greater flexibility, creativity, and problem-solving (Kheirzadeh & Sistani, 2018), and Iranian studies suggest that reflective teaching improves learner outcomes by fostering autonomy and motivation (Abdolrezapour & Fallah, 2015).

Reflective thinking is not, however, uniformly effective. Its benefits do not appear consistently across all students or settings (Turan et al., 2019), and although teachers who reflect regularly tend to teach more effectively, rigid curricula and limited professional development can restrict their opportunities to do so (Aliakbari & Adibpour, 2018). Personality and learning preferences also moderate how much individuals reflect. Reflective thinking has been linked to particular learning styles and ego states, such as the "internal adult," which may predict academic engagement, while teachers' reflective capacity varies with their experience and educational background. Taken together, these mixed findings indicate that reflective thinking is best understood as a context-sensitive practice rather than a uniformly beneficial one.

In sum, reflective thinking serves as a foundational element of both teaching and learning, supporting critical self-evaluation, strategic problem-solving, and the integration of knowledge across settings. Its contribution to productive language skills appears to be largely indirect: by prompting learners to evaluate their own speaking and writing and to plan revisions, reflection sustains the self-regulatory cycle that drives improvement in those skills (Farahian et al., 2021).

Self-Evaluation

Self-evaluation has gained prominence in education alongside intensified accountability regimes rooted in neoliberal policy (McNamara & O'Hara, 2008). Historically, European education systems relied heavily on external inspection and evaluation; more recently, they have shifted toward internal self-evaluation in order to grant institutions and teachers greater autonomy (Nevo, 2002). Although self-evaluation carries considerable promise, it can be difficult to implement and often requires professional support to be effective (McNamara & O'Hara, 2008).

Context-sensitive training and external data-collection tools are therefore important for sound self-evaluation, and self-evaluation models are best adapted to local needs rather than

imposed uniformly. One influential review concluded that self-evaluation had become central to European education but functioned well only with strong support from qualified evaluators (McNamara & O'Hara, 2008).

Evidence on self-evaluation reveals both benefits and challenges. When linked to intrinsic motivation, self-evaluation can enhance performance and engagement among both teachers and students (Su et al., 2022). Although data-driven oversight may constrain teachers' autonomy; nevertheless, fostering self-evaluation and intrinsic motivation remains a productive route to professional growth and effective teaching (Su et al., 2022).

In language learning, self-evaluation supports the development of writing proficiency, self-efficacy, autonomy, and readiness for independent study (Al-Mwzaiji & Alzubi, 2022). Embedded within structured frameworks and self-regulated learning, it increases motivation and involvement (Panadero et al., 2017). This emphasis aligns with the broader shift toward assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning, in which evaluation is used formatively to guide and improve performance rather than merely to certify it (Zohrabi & Nasirfam, 2024).

Self-evaluation is not automatically effective, however; learners become frustrated when criteria are unclear (Brown, 2005; McMillan & Hearn, 2008), which underscores the need for transparent rubrics and teacher support. With such scaffolding, self-evaluation has been shown to strengthen students' writing and sustain their motivation (Javaherbakhsh, 2010), and portfolio assessment in particular encourages reflection and autonomy, especially among more advanced learners (Biglari et al., 2021).

In the Iranian EFL context, learners who evaluate themselves regularly tend to be more motivated and to take greater responsibility for their learning (Birjandi & Tamjid, 2010), and pairing self-evaluation with peer feedback is particularly beneficial (Ghazizadeh & Bazargani, 2019). A correlational study of 103 Iranian EFL learners found that both learner autonomy and motivation predicted reading comprehension, with autonomy emerging as the stronger predictor (Ghafournia & Malekshahi, 2025), reinforcing the value of strategies, such as self-evaluation, that build autonomy.

Crucially for the present study, self-evaluation appears to feed directly into productive language skills: by judging their own writing and speaking against explicit criteria, learners identify weaknesses and revise accordingly, which improves the quality of their output (Javaherbakhsh, 2010). Teacher-oriented evaluation practices also matter, as tailored teacher education has been found to shape Iranian EFL instructors' attitudes toward assessment innovations such as dynamic assessment (Zohrabi & Khalili, 2025), which in turn influences how effectively self-evaluation is implemented in the classroom.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in self-regulated learning theory (Zimmerman, 2000) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997), which together explain how reflective thinking and self-evaluation function. Within self-regulated learning, learners move through cyclical phases of forethought, performance, and self-reflection, monitoring and adjusting their cognition, behavior, and affect in

pursuit of goals (Panadero et al., 2017). Reflective thinking maps onto the self-reflection phase: Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988) guides learners through description, analysis, and action planning, thereby strengthening metacognitive awareness and emotional regulation. Self-evaluation operationalizes the self-monitoring and self-judgment components of the cycle; the TOEFL iBT-based checklists used in this study provide learners with explicit criteria against which to appraise their performance. Social cognitive theory further explains why self-evaluation should bolster well-being and productive skills, because comparing one's performance against clear standards builds self-efficacy, which in turn drives motivation and achievement (Bandura, 1997). Within this framework, mindfulness can be viewed as both an input to and an outcome of these processes: nonjudgmental, present-moment awareness supports the monitoring that self-regulation requires, while sustained engagement in reflection and self-evaluation cultivates greater mindful awareness. This integrative perspective connects the three constructs and motivates the comparative design of the present study.

The Purpose of the Study

Although mindfulness, reflective thinking, and self-evaluation have each attracted attention in education, no study to date has directly compared how reflective thinking and self-evaluation foster mindful language learning among Iranian intermediate EFL learners, nor has any clarified which strategy is more effective for which outcome. The present study addresses this gap by examining the comparative effects of reflective thinking and self-evaluation on academic mindfulness, subjective well-being, and productive language proficiency (speaking and writing) in this population. Because mindfulness underlies emotional control, anxiety reduction, and motivation, it is especially consequential in language learning. By comparing the two strategies with conventional instruction, the study seeks to clarify how each shapes learners' psychological and academic development and to inform evidence-based decisions about classroom practice.

Research Questions

This study poses three research questions:

RQ1. Is there a significant difference between the effects of reflective thinking and self-evaluation on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' academic mindfulness?

RQ2. Is there a significant difference between the effects of reflective thinking and self-evaluation on learners' subjective well-being?

RQ3. Do reflective thinking and self-evaluation produce greater gains in productive language proficiency, specifically speaking and writing performance, than traditional instruction?

Method

Design of the Study

This study employed a quantitative, quasi-experimental, pretest–posttest control-group design to examine the comparative effects of reflective thinking and self-evaluation on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' academic mindfulness, subjective well-being, and productive language performance

(speaking and writing). Because participants were drawn from intact university classes and could not be randomly assigned at the individual level, a quasi-experimental rather than a true experimental design was adopted, and baseline differences were controlled statistically. Three intact classes were assigned to the conditions: a reflective-thinking group that kept weekly journals structured by Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988), a self-evaluation group that completed self-evaluation checklists based on TOEFL iBT criteria, and a control group that received conventional EFL instruction.

Several steps were taken to address the homogeneity of the intact groups. First, the Oxford Quick Placement Test was administered as a screening measure so that only learners at the intermediate (B1) level were included. Second, the groups were matched on gender, age, and proficiency. Third, baseline equivalence was verified statistically: a one-way analysis of variance confirmed no significant pretest difference in proficiency across the three groups, $F(2, 87) = 0.02$, $p = .98$. Finally, each posttest comparison used the corresponding pretest score as a covariate, which further adjusted for any residual baseline variation.

The intervention comprised sixteen 60-minute sessions delivered twice weekly across eight instructional weeks (Weeks 2–9). These sessions were preceded by a pretest in Week 1 and followed by a posttest in Week 10, yielding a 10-week study period in total. Thus, the reference to Week 10 denotes the tenth calendar week of the study (the posttest week), whereas the sixteen sessions denote the count of intervention meetings distributed across the eight intervening weeks. Both the pretests and posttests assessed academic mindfulness, subjective well-being, and speaking and writing performance.

Participants

The study involved 90 intermediate EFL learners enrolled in general English courses during the spring 2025 semester at Islamic Azad University, Lahijan, Iran. This site was selected because it provided access to a sufficient number of adult EFL learners studying within a single, comparable instructional context, which supported contextual homogeneity, and because the researcher's affiliation with the institution allowed sustained, fidelity-controlled implementation of the intervention.

Purposive sampling was used to ensure comparability of proficiency. Because learners enrolled in general English courses at this type of institution vary considerably in language ability, the Oxford Quick Placement Test was administered as a screening measure, and only learners whose scores fell within the intermediate (B1) band were retained; students scoring below or above this band were excluded. In other words, the classes were not assumed to be uniformly intermediate, and proficiency was established empirically through screening rather than by enrollment status. After screening, the three intact classes (approximately 30 eligible learners each) were assigned to the reflective-thinking, self-evaluation, and control conditions. The final sample comprised 45 women and 45 men, with a mean age of 20.7 years ($SD = 1.9$, range = 18–24).

Inclusion criteria were (a) intermediate proficiency, operationalized as a QPT score of 30–47, corresponding to CEFR level B1; (b) no prior participation in mindfulness, reflective-thinking, or self-evaluation programs; and (c) voluntary informed consent. Learners with beginner or

advanced proficiency (QPT < 30 or > 47) and those concurrently undergoing psychological interventions were excluded. An a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power to estimate the sample size required for a one-way analysis of covariance with three groups and one covariance, assuming an alpha level of .05, a power of .80, and a medium effect size ($f = .25$). The final sample consisted of 90 participants distributed across the three groups. Demographic characteristics of the participants by group are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants by Group

Group	n	Women	Men	QPT M (SD)
Reflective Thinking	30	15	15	39.25 (3.61)
Self-Evaluation	30	15	15	39.43 (4.64)
Control	30	15	15	39.21 (3.97)
Total	90	45	45	—

Note. QPT = Oxford Quick Placement Test. Overall mean age = 20.7 years (SD = 1.9, range = 18–24).

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to recognized ethical standards for research involving human participants. Before data collection, all participants received an explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, and they provided written informed consent using Persian-language forms to ensure full comprehension. Participation was voluntary, and learners were informed that they could withdraw at any point without any effect on their course standing. To protect confidentiality, each participant was assigned a coded identifier; no personally identifying information was attached to the data, and all records were stored securely and accessed only by the research team. The study protocol was approved by the relevant ethics committee of Islamic Azad University, Lahijan.

Instrumentation

Five instruments were used to measure participants' proficiency, academic mindfulness, subjective well-being, and productive language performance. Each instrument is described below, together with reliability and, where available, validity evidence from its original source and from the present study.

Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT). The QPT (UCLES, 2001) is a 60-item, multiple-choice measure of general English proficiency that is widely used to place learners on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) scale. In the present study it served as a screening instrument to identify intermediate (B1) learners, operationalized as scores of 30–47. The QPT has

demonstrated strong reliability in prior research, and in the present sample its internal consistency was good (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$).

Academic Mindfulness Questionnaire (AMQ-5). Academic Mindfulness Questionnaire (AMQ-5). Academic mindfulness was measured with the 20-item AMQ-5 (Naderipour et al., 2024), on which respondents rate items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 5 = always). The original validation study demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$) and acceptable construct validity, with a five-factor structure confirmed through confirmatory factor analysis (RMSEA = .047, AGFI = .91, NFI = .96, CFI = .98). In the present study, internal consistency was high ($\alpha = .89$), and a confirmatory factor analysis indicated acceptable model fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.42$, CFI = .91, RMSEA = .06).

College Student Subjective Wellbeing Questionnaire (CSSWQ). Subjective well-being was assessed with the 16-item CSSWQ (Renshaw, 2015), which comprises subscales tapping academic satisfaction, academic efficacy, school connectedness, and college gratitude, each rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Renshaw (2015) reported good reliability and a sound factor structure. In the present study, internal consistency was good for the composite scale ($\alpha = .85$) and acceptable across the subscales ($\alpha = .78-.88$), and a confirmatory factor analysis showed adequate fit (CFI = .92, RMSEA = .07).

Speaking task. Speaking performance was assessed with a task adapted from the textbook *American English File 3* (Latham-Koenig & Oxenden, 2014; Units 3 and 4) and scored with the analytic TOEFL iBT speaking rubric (range = 0–16). Each performance was rated independently by two trained raters; inter-rater agreement was high (Cohen's $\kappa = .80$), and discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

Writing task. Writing performance was assessed with a parallel task drawn from *American English File 3* (Units 3 and 4) and scored with the TOEFL iBT writing rubric (range = 0–20). Two trained raters scored the samples independently, with high inter-rater agreement (Cohen's $\kappa = .80$).

Data Collection

Data were collected over 10 weeks through pretesting, an eight-week intervention, and post-testing, as summarized in Table 2. In Week 1, all participants completed the pretests (the QPT screening, the AMQ-5, and the CSSWQ) and received an orientation to their group's activities. The intervention then ran across Weeks 2–9 in sixteen 60-minute sessions (two per week). Each session followed a common structure: 25 minutes of regular instruction from the shared syllabus, 20 minutes of group-specific activity, and a 15-minute wrap-up. In Week 10, all groups completed the posttests (the AMQ-5, the CSSWQ, and the speaking and writing tasks). The three conditions differed only in the 20-minute group-specific component, which is described below.

Reflective-thinking group. After completing each task, learners kept a weekly reflective journal structured by Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988). They wrote through its stages (description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan) to reflect on their learning and to plan improvements, and periodic group sharing allowed them to discuss their reflections.

Self-evaluation group. After each task, learners appraised their own performance using structured self-evaluation checklists based on TOEFL iBT criteria. They judged their work against explicit descriptors, identified strengths and weaknesses, and recorded targets for improvement in a portfolio that was updated throughout the intervention.

Control group. Learners received conventional EFL instruction over the same period. The 20-minute component was devoted to standard grammar, vocabulary, and speaking and writing practice from the shared syllabus, without any reflective or self-evaluative activity.

To support treatment fidelity, all sessions were delivered by the same instructor, who used standardized lesson plans and maintained the identical time structure across the three groups. The group-specific procedures were modeled at the outset, and adherence was monitored throughout the intervention. Because local internet connectivity in Lahijan was unreliable, all sessions and assessments were conducted in person to ensure consistent delivery across groups.

Table 2

Intervention Schedule

Week	Reflective-Thinking Group	Self-Evaluation Group	Control Group
1	Pretest (QPT, AMQ-5, CSSWQ); Gibbs' journal setup	Pretest; TOEFL iBT checklist training; portfolio setup	Pretest; course introduction
2–4	Journal writing (Units 3A–3B); discussions	Self-evaluation (Units 3A–3B); portfolio updates	Grammar/vocabulary practice
5–8	Reflection and action planning (Units 3B–4B)	Self-designed evaluations (Units 3B–4B)	Speaking/writing drills
9	Final journal; group sharing	Final portfolio review	Review session
10	Posttest (AMQ-5, CSSWQ, language tasks)	Posttest	Posttest

Note. Pretests were completed before any intervention-related activities; training and setup took place after the pretest to avoid influencing baseline data.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 27). First, descriptive statistics summarized the distribution of each variable. To test the effects of the interventions, a series of one-way analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) compared the three groups on each posttest outcome (academic mindfulness, subjective well-being, speaking, and writing), with the corresponding pretest score

serving as the covariate and the QPT serving as the covariate for the language outcomes. This pretest-as-covariate approach is appropriate for a pretest–posttest control-group design, because it adjusts the posttest comparisons for any residual baseline differences and increases statistical power. Before the analyses were conducted, the relevant assumptions, normality of residuals, homogeneity of variance, and homogeneity of regression slopes were examined. Where the omnibus group effect was significant, Tukey’s HSD tests were used for pairwise comparisons, and partial eta squared (η^2p) was reported as the effect-size estimate. Regression analyses further examined predictive relationships among the variables. Missing data (less than 5%) were handled through multiple imputation.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

This study compared two interventions, reflective thinking and self-evaluation, with a conventional-instruction control group. Ninety Iranian intermediate EFL learners were assigned to the three groups, and their academic mindfulness (AMQ-5), subjective well-being (CSSWQ), and productive language performance (speaking and writing) were measured. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 3. At baseline, the three groups were comparable in English proficiency (QPT $\approx$ 39) and on the pretest measures of mindfulness and well-being. Following the intervention, both the reflective-thinking and the self-evaluation groups showed higher mean scores than the control group on every outcome. The self-evaluation group obtained the highest means on the language tasks, whereas the reflective-thinking group obtained the highest posttest mindfulness mean; the control group’s subjective well-being remained essentially unchanged.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables by Group (N = 90)

Variable	Group	n	M	SD	Min	Max
QPT	Control	30	39.21	3.97	33.6	47.6
	Reflective Thinking	30	39.25	3.61	32.3	46.3
	Self-Evaluation	30	39.43	4.64	27.0	48.5
AMQ-5 (pretest)	Control	30	52.64	5.62	42.4	62.0
	Reflective Thinking	30	54.16	6.51	41.3	68.0
	Self-Evaluation	30	55.74	6.44	41.3	69.9
CSSWQ (pretest)	Control	30	60.88	9.11	37.9	82.7
	Reflective Thinking	30	59.80	9.09	40.8	84.6

	Self-Evaluation	30	57.93	6.73	45.5	74.8
AMQ-5 (posttest)	Control	30	58.99	6.29	46.3	71.7
	Reflective Thinking	30	71.24	8.20	59.1	89.5
	Self-Evaluation	30	69.60	6.95	53.1	83.3
CSSWQ (posttest)	Control	30	60.92	9.22	40.4	82.6
	Reflective Thinking	30	72.51	8.53	59.3	94.5
	Self-Evaluation	30	75.29	10.03	57.9	93.3
Speaking	Control	30	8.74	2.10	3.7	12.5
	Reflective Thinking	30	11.13	2.10	8.0	18.7
	Self-Evaluation	30	11.88	2.37	7.9	16.1
Writing	Control	30	11.92	1.91	7.8	15.5
	Reflective Thinking	30	15.12	2.60	9.9	20.8
	Self-Evaluation	30	16.09	2.21	11.4	22.2

Note. QPT = Oxford Quick Placement Test; AMQ-5 = Academic Mindfulness Questionnaire; CSSWQ = College Student Subjective Wellbeing Questionnaire.

Inferential Analysis

Before the main analyses, the assumptions underlying the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were checked and were met. Residuals for all dependent variables were normally distributed (Shapiro–Wilk, $p > .05$), variances were homogeneous across groups (Levene’s test, $p > .05$), and the homogeneity-of-regression-slopes assumption held. A preliminary one-way analysis of variance confirmed that the groups did not differ in baseline English proficiency, $F(2, 87) = 0.02$, $p = .98$.

Four one-way ANCOVAs then tested the effects of the interventions on the four posttest outcomes, each adjusted for its baseline covariate (the QPT for the language outcomes and the corresponding pretest score for mindfulness and well-being). As summarized in Table 4, significant and large group effects emerged for all four dependent variables. The adjusted (estimated marginal) group means are reported in the sections below; their standard errors should be added from the SPSS estimated marginal means output, and the full set of pairwise comparisons is presented in Table 5.

Table 4

Summary of ANCOVA Results for the Posttest Outcomes

Outcome	Source	df	F	p	η^2p
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AMQ-5 (posttest)	Group	2	25.66	< .001	.374
	Pretest (covariate)	1	1.02	.315	.012
CSSWQ (posttest)	Group	2	20.65	< .001	.324
	Pretest (covariate)	1	2.65	.107	.030
Speaking	Group	2	16.50	< .001	.277
	QPT (covariate)	1	0.05	.817	.001
Writing	Group	2	27.95	< .001	.394
	QPT (covariate)	1	0.79	.375	.009

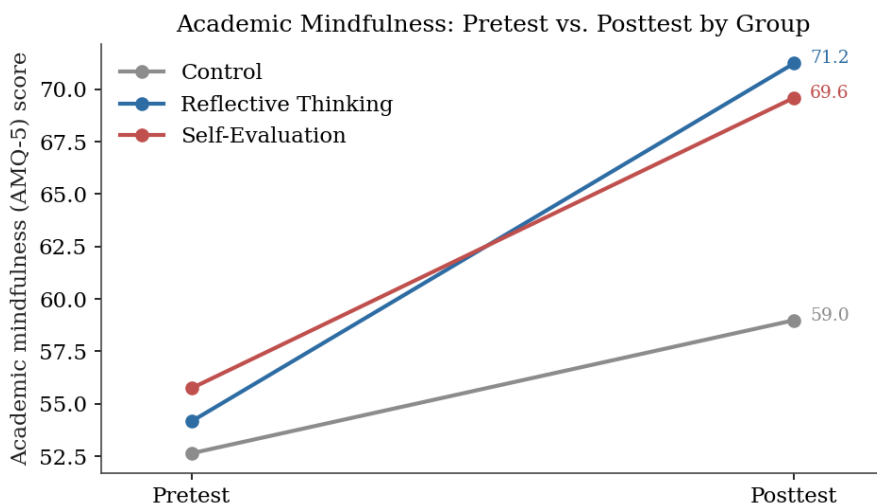
Note. η^2p = partial eta squared. RT = reflective-thinking group; SE = self-evaluation group.

Academic Mindfulness

For academic mindfulness, both the reflective-thinking group (adjusted $M = 71.2$) and the self-evaluation group (adjusted $M = 69.4$) significantly outperformed the control group (adjusted $M = 59.2$; $p < .001$ for both comparisons). The two intervention groups did not differ significantly from each other ($p = .587$); thus, although the reflective-thinking group's mean was numerically higher, the two strategies were statistically equivalent for academic mindfulness. This pattern is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Academic Mindfulness (AMQ-5) Pretest and Posttest Scores by Group

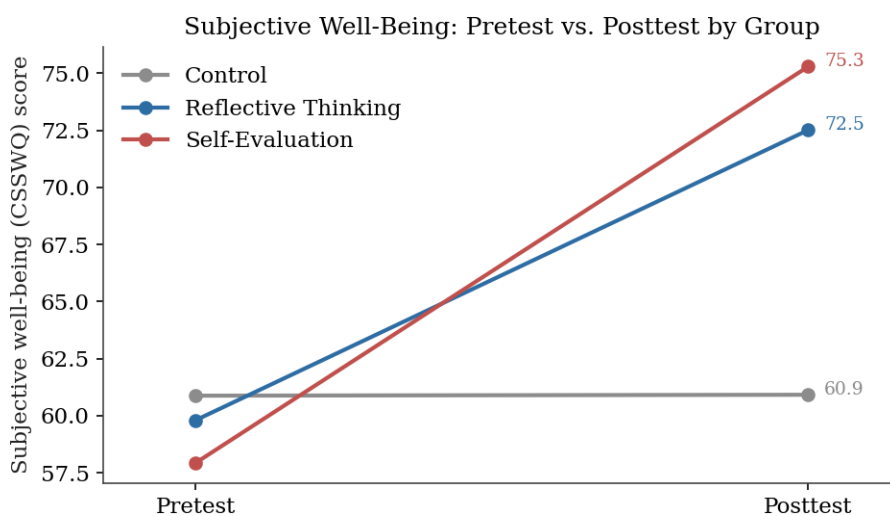


Subjective Well-Being

For subjective well-being, both intervention groups (self-evaluation adjusted $M = 75.6$; reflective-thinking adjusted $M = 72.5$) reported significantly higher well-being than the control group (adjusted $M = 60.7$; $p < .001$ for both comparisons). The difference between the two intervention groups was not statistically significant ($p = .057$); the slightly higher self-evaluation mean should therefore be interpreted only as a non-significant trend rather than as evidence of superiority. Figure 2 displays this pattern.

Figure 2

Subjective Well-Being (CSSWQ) Pretest and Posttest Scores by Group

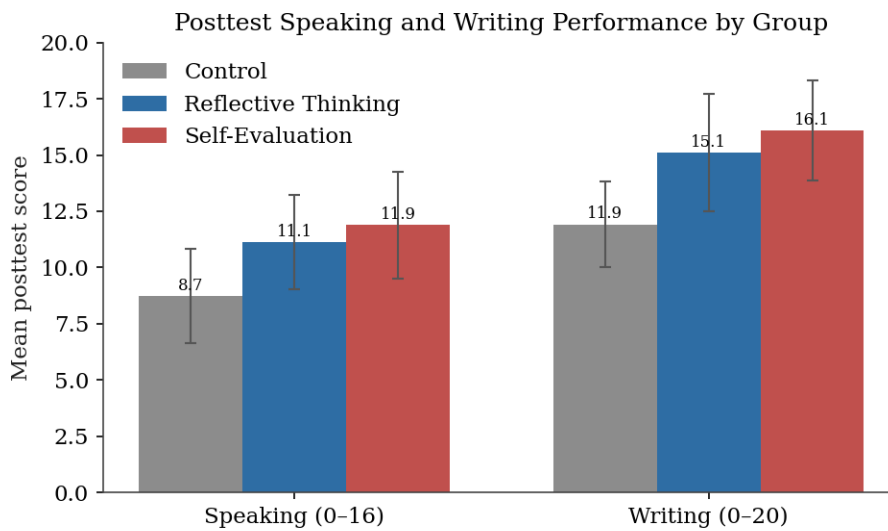


Language Performance

Language performance improved substantially in both intervention groups. For speaking, the self-evaluation group (adjusted $M = 11.88$) and the reflective-thinking group (adjusted $M = 11.13$) significantly exceeded the control group (adjusted $M = 8.74$; $p < .001$), and the two interventions did not differ significantly from each other ($p = .184$). The largest effect occurred for writing: both intervention groups (self-evaluation adjusted $M = 16.1$; reflective-thinking adjusted $M = 15.1$) markedly outperformed the control group (adjusted $M = 11.9$; $p < .001$). For writing, the self-evaluation group also showed a small but statistically significant advantage over the reflective-thinking group ($p = .047$). Figure 3 presents the posttest speaking and writing results, and the complete pairwise comparisons for all four outcomes appear in Table 5.

Figure 3

Posttest Speaking and Writing Performance by Group


Table 5
Pairwise Comparisons of Adjusted Means by Outcome

Outcome	Comparison	Mean difference	p
Academic mindfulness	RT vs. Control	12.0	< .001
	SE vs. Control	10.2	< .001
	RT vs. SE	1.8	.587
Subjective well-being	RT vs. Control	11.8	< .001
	SE vs. Control	14.9	< .001
	SE vs. RT	3.1	.057
Speaking	RT vs. Control	2.4	< .001
	SE vs. Control	3.1	< .001
	SE vs. RT	0.8	.184
Writing	RT vs. Control	3.2	< .001
	SE vs. Control	4.2	< .001
	SE vs. RT	1.0	.047

Note. Mean differences were computed from the adjusted (estimated marginal) means. RT = reflective-thinking group; SE = self-evaluation group; Control = conventional-instruction group. A statistically significant difference between the two intervention groups emerged only for writing.

Correlation Analysis

To examine how the outcomes related to one another, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted on the posttest variables (Table 6). All outcomes were positively and significantly correlated (all $p < .05$), indicating that gains in mindfulness, well-being, and language skills tended to co-occur. The strongest association was between well-being and writing ($r = .45$, $p < .001$), followed by well-being and speaking ($r = .42$, $p < .001$). The correlation between mindfulness and well-being was weaker but still significant ($r = .26$, $p = .013$).

Table 6

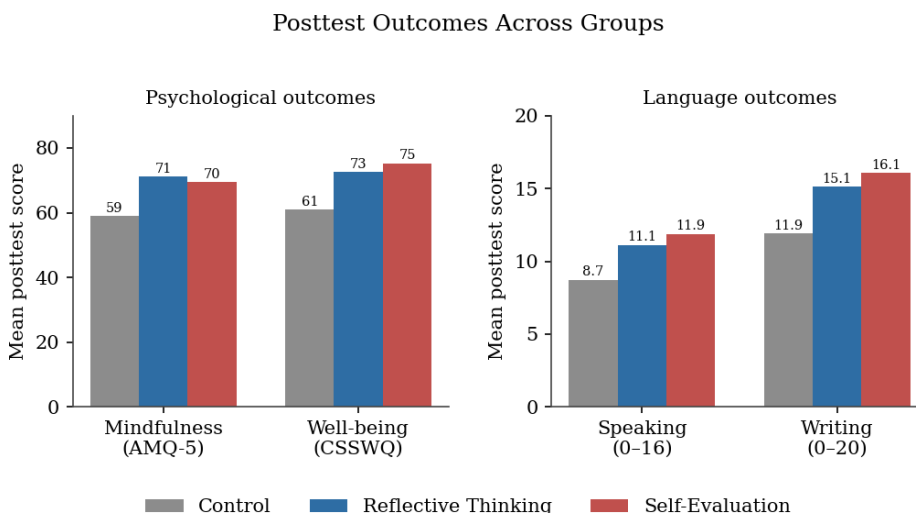
Pearson Correlation Matrix for the Posttest Outcomes (N = 90)

	AMQ-5	CSSWQ	Speaking	Writing
AMQ-5	—	.26	.39	.38
CSSWQ	.26	—	.42	.45
Speaking	.39	.42	—	.28
Writing	.38	.45	.28	—

Note. AMQ-5 = academic mindfulness; CSSWQ = subjective well-being. All correlations were significant at $p < .05$.

Figure 4

Posttest Outcomes Across Groups



Note. The psychological outcomes (left panel) and language outcomes (right panel) are shown on separate axes because they use different score ranges.

Discussion

This study examined the comparative effects of reflective thinking and self-evaluation on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' academic mindfulness, subjective well-being, and productive language performance, relative to conventional instruction. The findings can be summarized briefly. The three groups were equivalent at baseline, and after the eight-week intervention both the reflective-thinking and the self-evaluation groups significantly outperformed the control group on all four outcomes, with large effect sizes. Crucially, however, the two interventions differed significantly from each other on only one outcome: self-evaluation produced significantly higher writing scores than reflective thinking. For academic mindfulness, subjective well-being, and speaking, the two strategies were statistically equivalent, despite small numerical differences favoring reflective thinking for mindfulness and self-evaluation for well-being and speaking. These results therefore support the broad efficacy of both metacognitive strategies but do not establish either as generally superior.

Interpretation of the Findings

Academic mindfulness. Both interventions substantially raised academic mindfulness relative to the control group, which is consistent with evidence that metacognitive and reflective practices strengthen present-moment awareness and emotional regulation (Blanke et al., 2019). Contrary to the expectation that reflective thinking would be the more effective strategy in this domain, the two conditions did not differ significantly. A plausible explanation is that self-evaluation, although framed as a product-oriented strategy, also requires learners to attend closely to their own performance and internal states, thereby engaging the same reflective monitoring that underlies mindfulness. The brief, eight-week timeframe may likewise have been insufficient for a differential advantage to emerge. This null result tempers earlier claims that reflection is uniquely suited to cultivating mindfulness and suggests instead that several metacognitive routes may converge on comparable mindfulness gains.

Subjective well-being. Both interventions also improved well-being relative to the control group, in line with research linking self-regulatory engagement to greater self-efficacy and emotional stability (Klussman et al., 2020; Panadero et al., 2017). Although the self-evaluation group's mean was slightly higher, this difference was not statistically significant ($p = .057$) and should not be read as evidence that self-evaluation is superior for well-being. The finding indicates only that both strategies enhanced well-being to a comparable degree, and it cautions against the common tendency to interpret near-threshold p values as meaningful effects.

Language performance. For speaking, the two interventions were equally effective, and both exceeded the control group; for writing, self-evaluation produced a small but statistically significant advantage over reflective thinking. This selective advantage is theoretically coherent. Writing is a product that lends itself to criterion-referenced appraisal and revision, and the TOEFL

iBT-based checklists used by the self-evaluation group provided explicit standards against which learners could compare drafts and target improvements, a process closely aligned with the demands of writing development (Al-Mwzaiji & Alzubi, 2022; Zohrabi & Nasirfam, 2024). Speaking, by contrast, is more spontaneous and time-bound and offers fewer opportunities for the deliberate, criterion-based revision that benefits writing, which may explain why the self-evaluation advantage did not extend to it. This pattern is consistent with social cognitive theory, in which clear performance standards build self-efficacy and channel effort toward measurable gains (Bandura, 1997).

Relationships among the outcomes. The positive correlations among mindfulness, well-being, and language performance indicate that gains tended to co-occur. These associations should nonetheless be interpreted with caution, because they are correlational and cannot establish that improvement in one domain caused improvement in another, nor can they rule out shared influences such as learners' general engagement with the intervention.

Theoretical Interpretation

Taken together, the findings are best understood within a self-regulated learning framework (Zimmerman, 2000). Both reflective thinking and self-evaluation engage the self-monitoring and self-judgment phases of self-regulation, which may account for their broadly comparable effects across most outcomes. The divergence in writing suggests that the form of self-regulation matters for skill-specific gains: criterion-based self-evaluation appears especially well-suited to product skills, whereas the more open-ended monitoring fostered by reflection is not disadvantageous but confers no additional product benefit. This more differentiated reading moves the discussion beyond a simple question of which strategy is "better" toward an account of when, and for which outcomes, each strategy is most useful.

Relation to Previous Research

The results both align with and qualify earlier work. They corroborate studies reporting that self-evaluation enhances writing and self-efficacy (Javaherbakhsh, 2010; Panadero et al., 2017) and that reflection supports emotional regulation and mindfulness (Mall-Amiri, 2024). At the same time, they qualify accounts that treat reflection as distinctly superior for mindfulness, or self-evaluation as broadly superior for affective outcomes; in the present sample the two strategies were largely interchangeable except for writing. Several features of the study warrant caution in interpreting these patterns, including the reliance on self-report measures for mindfulness and well-being, the short intervention period, and the single-institution sample, each of which may have limited the emergence of finer-grained differences between the two strategies.

Conclusion

This study compared reflective thinking and self-evaluation with conventional instruction in order to determine how these metacognitive strategies shape mindfulness, well-being, and language performance among Iranian intermediate EFL learners. Both interventions significantly enhanced participants' academic mindfulness, subjective well-being, and speaking and writing performance

relative to the control group, and all of these effects were large. The two strategies were comparably effective on most outcomes and differed significantly from each other only on writing, where self-evaluation produced higher scores than reflective thinking. These findings indicate that both reflective thinking and self-evaluation are effective routes to mindful, self-regulated language learning, while suggesting that criterion-based self-evaluation may offer a particular advantage for developing writing.

The results carry practical implications for language instruction. Because both strategies produced substantial gains, teachers can reasonably adopt either guided reflective journaling or structured self-evaluation to foster mindfulness, well-being, and productive skills. Where the instructional goal is to strengthen writing in particular, structured self-evaluation against explicit criteria, such as rubric- or checklist-based appraisal, appears especially beneficial (Boud & Falchikov, 1989; Panadero et al., 2017). More broadly, the findings support teaching learners to monitor both the process and the product of their work, and a staged approach that begins with reflection and concludes with criterion-based self-evaluation may combine the introspective benefits of the former with the performance focus of the latter. Effective implementation requires modeling these strategies, providing clear guidelines, and gradually fostering learner autonomy.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample comprised 90 intermediate learners from a single institution, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The eight-week intervention captured only short-term effects, leaving the durability of the gains uncertain. In addition, mindfulness and well-being were assessed through self-report measures, which may be subject to response bias, and the broadly comparable effects of the two strategies may partly reflect the brief intervention period rather than genuine equivalence.

Future research should address these limitations by involving more diverse populations across multiple institutions, extending the intervention period to examine the durability of the gains, and incorporating qualitative methods to explore learners' experiences in greater depth. Investigating the effects of these strategies on receptive skills, such as listening and reading, and testing hybrid models that combine reflection with self-evaluation would further clarify how metacognitive strategies can best support language learning.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Farkhondeh Sha'bani holds a master's degree in English language teaching from Lahijan Islamic Azad University. Her main research interests are CALL, motivation, and reading and speaking skills.

Dr. Abbas Pourhosein Gilakjani (corresponding author) is an Associate Professor of TESOL (USM, Malaysia) at Islamic Azad University, Lahijan, Iran where he teaches courses in English Language

Teaching. His main research interests are human-computer interaction, CALL, language teaching methodologies, and research on English language teaching/learning. He is the member of the editorial board of Cogent Education (ISSN: 2331-186X), Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education (ISSN: 2363-5169), and Reading & Writing Quarterly: Overcoming Learning Difficulties (ISSN: 1057-3569).