

Understanding Language Teacher Cognition in EFL Education: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Teacher cognition has emerged as a central construct in language teacher education, reflecting how teachers' mental lives shape their pedagogical decision-making. The present study provides a systematic review of empirical research on language teacher cognition in EFL contexts conducted over the past decade. By examining full-text analysis of 41 empirical studies published in peer-reviewed English language journal articles from four databases, this review investigates how language teacher cognition is conceptualized, how it relates to classroom practice, and what factors mediate this relationship, as well as consolidating implications for teacher education and ongoing professional learning. Our findings indicate that teacher cognition is now viewed less as a set of beliefs or knowledge and more as a dynamic, socially situated construct that includes teachers' professional identities. Many studies reported the misalignment between teachers' reported cognitions and their classroom practices, often shaped by contextual pressures, prior educational experiences, and professional training. At the same time, alignment between cognition and practice is more common when teachers work in supportive, collaborative environments. The review calls for longitudinal, cross-cultural, and theory-driven studies to broaden understanding of teacher cognition and strengthen its contribution to teacher education.

Keywords: EFL teachers, instructional practice, language teacher cognition, professional development, teacher education

1. Introduction

In recent decades, scholarly attention has been directed increasingly toward understanding teacher cognition and its influence on instructional practices, particularly within the field of language education (Borg, 2019; Burns, Freeman, & Edwards, 2015; Johnson, 2018). This increase in attention reflects a broader shift in educational thinking that teachers are not passive implementers of curricula but active, reflective decision-makers who significantly shape classroom learning experiences (Jessani, Hendricks, Nicol, & Young, 2019). In this regard, understanding the cognitive dimensions of teaching has become integral to understanding the practice of language instruction itself (Borg, 2015; Li, 2020).

Teacher cognition refers to the complex, unobservable mental constructs that inform what teachers think, know, and believe concerning their instructional practice (Borg, 2003). Initially emerging from the broader concept of teacher thinking (Clark & Peterson, 1986), the concept emphasizes that teaching is not a mechanistic act but a deeply skilled and reflective activity, grounded in teachers' active decision-making and interpretive processes (Borg, 2019). It constitutes a personalized, context-sensitive, and dynamic system that underpins teachers' instructional behaviors (Borg, 2015; Burns et al., 2015; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015). It plays a crucial role not only in shaping pedagogical choices but also in influencing professional growth and development (Li, 2020; Öztürk, 2021). In EFL settings, where teaching is often embedded in diverse linguistic and cultural contexts, understanding the intricate nature of teacher cognition becomes even more important and necessary (Li, 2024).

Teacher cognition research traces its roots to the 1970s, achieved notable progress in the mid-1990s, and has since become a central focus within foreign language education (Borg, 2015; Gao & Zhang, 2020). Over the past three decades, the field has developed rapidly, transforming from a relatively underexplored topic into a well-established area of academic investigation (Borg, 2019; Li, 2020), attracting increasing attention from scholars, theorists, and practitioners (Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015; Öztürk, 2021). This shift has resulted in extensive exploration of understanding the nature of teacher cognition (e.g., Ngo, 2018), the factors that influence its development (e.g., Chen & Abdullah, 2022; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2017), and the relationships between teachers' cognitions and their actual instructional practices (e.g., Wang & Ryan, 2023; Wei & Cao, 2020). In particular, research on language teacher cognition (LTC) has addressed a wide range of instructional domains (e.g., Gordon, 2023; Mohaideen, Ismail, & Ab Rashid, 2020; Rahimi & Ong, 2023; Zhang & Sun, 2022) and emerging pedagogical concerns (e.g., Chen & Abdullah, 2022; Wang & Ryan, 2023), reflecting a shift toward more diverse theoretical and methodological orientations (Li, 2023).

Despite this growing interest, literature reviews focusing on LTC have only begun to appear in recent years, including narrative reviews (e.g., Wang & Zhang, 2024; Zheng, 2015), bibliometric analysis (e.g., Chen & Abdullah, 2023), and systematic reviews (e.g., Li, 2024;

Yao, Shulin, Chonghong, & Lianjiang, 2022). Chen and Abdullah's (2023) bibliometric analysis was limited to Scopus-indexed publications, restricting the scope of analysis. Yao et al. (2022) reviewed 67 empirical studies on L2 writing teachers, offering insights into cognition and practice but with limited applicability beyond writing instruction. In their 2024 study, Wang and Zhang reviewed LTC-related publications featured in *System* over a 15-year span, identifying thematic developments within that journal but not across the broader field. These reviews, while informative, indicate the need for a more comprehensive and inclusive synthesis of LTC research.

Systematic reviews are rigorous and replicable methods for synthesizing research evidence across a field, offering an organized and transparent overview of its evolution (Page et al., 2021). Compared with narrative reviews, systematic reviews provide a more structured approach to identifying patterns, addressing research gaps, and informing future studies (Siddaway et al., 2019). Although a number of literature reviews on LTC have been carried out in recent years to help address this need, none have systematically examined the conceptualization and pedagogical implications for both pre-service and in-service teachers addressed in empirical studies on LTC within a global EFL context. Given the sustained interest in language teacher cognition and its critical role in enhancing language teaching and learning, a systematic exploration of the literature from the past decade is both timely and necessary.

This review is guided by the following research questions: (a) How has language teacher cognition been conceptualized in previous research?, (b) What relationships have been identified between language teacher cognition and classroom practice?, (c) What factors influence language teacher cognition and its enactment in practice?, and (d) What implications for teacher education and professional development can be drawn from previous studies?

2. Method

Drawing on published empirical studies concerning LTC, this systematic review was designed in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The content analysis and article review processes were conducted manually by the researchers. Data sources included four major databases: Web of Science (WoS), ScienceDirect, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) and Scopus. To guarantee the studies' relevance and methodological quality, defined inclusion and exclusion parameters were employed, as detailed in Sections 2.2 and 2.3. In line with the PRISMA framework, the retrieved articles were subjected to a four-phase review process: Identification, Screening, Eligibility, and Inclusion (see Figure 1).

2.1 Identification

A comprehensive and systematic search was conducted to identify relevant literature on teacher cognition, particularly within the context of EFL education. The search was carried out using titles, abstracts, and keywords across four major academic databases: Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), ScienceDirect, Scopus, and Web of Science (WoS). The Boolean operator 'AND' was used to combine key terms that corresponded with the databases' subject headings and appeared in relevant fields. The search strings include ("teacher cognition") AND ("EFL" OR "English as a foreign language") AND ("language teacher" OR "second language teacher" OR "foreign language teacher"). The search targeted literature published between 2016 and 2025 and was conducted in June 2025. This process yielded 57 publications from ERIC, 106 from ScienceDirect, 29 from Web of Science, and 105 from Scopus. Finally, a total of 297 articles were identified. All references were subsequently exported to Zotero version 7 for further screening and analysis.

2.2 Screening

Following the initial identification of studies through database searches, a two-step screening process was implemented to ensure the quality and relevance of the reviewed publications. The first step of the screening process involved removing duplicate records, resulting in a total of 228 unique articles for further assessment. Subsequently, four inclusion criteria were applied to the remaining studies by screening titles, abstracts, and keywords.

First, to uphold academic rigor, only articles published in peer-reviewed journals were retained. Peer review is widely acknowledged as a fundamental standard of scientific quality (Smith, 2006). Articles ($n = 14$) that were not published in peer-reviewed journals, including books, book chapters, conference proceedings, and dissertations, were excluded due to the uncertainty regarding their peer-review status. Second, only empirical studies were included in the review. Non-empirical publications ($n = 24$), such as theoretical papers (e.g., Alzaanin, 2020), literature reviews (e.g., Chen & Abdullah, 2023; Wang & Zhang, 2024), were excluded. This criterion ensured that all selected studies were grounded in data-based inquiry. Third, only research articles written in English were selected. Articles written in other languages were excluded to avoid potential issues related to translation accuracy and interpretation. Finally, only publications explicitly addressing teacher cognition were covered. Articles ($n = 84$) unrelated to the theme were excluded to ensure the records were relevant for this literature review. Thus, 122 articles were deemed ineligible and excluded during the screening procedure.

2.3 Eligibility

After the initial screening, 106 articles proceeded to the eligibility stage; however, 24 of them were either inaccessible or not available in the specified databases, leaving 82 studies for retrieval and further assessment. The researchers retrieved and reviewed the full-text versions of all potentially eligible articles and reached a consensus on whether teacher cognition was treated as a central construct or a phenomenon of interest. To guide this process, two exclusion criteria were established: (1) the article did not position teacher cognition as a primary focus; and/or (2) the full-text discussion of the construct lacked sufficient depth or clarity to be regarded as meaningful conceptual or empirical focal points. These criteria were applied to eliminate studies that merely referenced teacher cognition in a

superficial or generalized way. Publications that focused on broader themes like teacher emotion, not directly related to teacher cognition, were excluded. As a result, 41 publications that mentioned the constructs only briefly were excluded.

2.4 Inclusion

After the prior stages, 41 articles were finalized for inclusion in the systematic review. These studies met all inclusion criteria: they were empirical, peer-reviewed journal publications written in English and explicitly centered on teacher cognition within EFL contexts. Each article provided a substantive and conceptually meaningful treatment of teacher cognition, either as a primary research focus or as a core analytical construct. The final set of studies forms the empirical foundation for synthesizing current research trends and thematic emphases in the field of LTC.

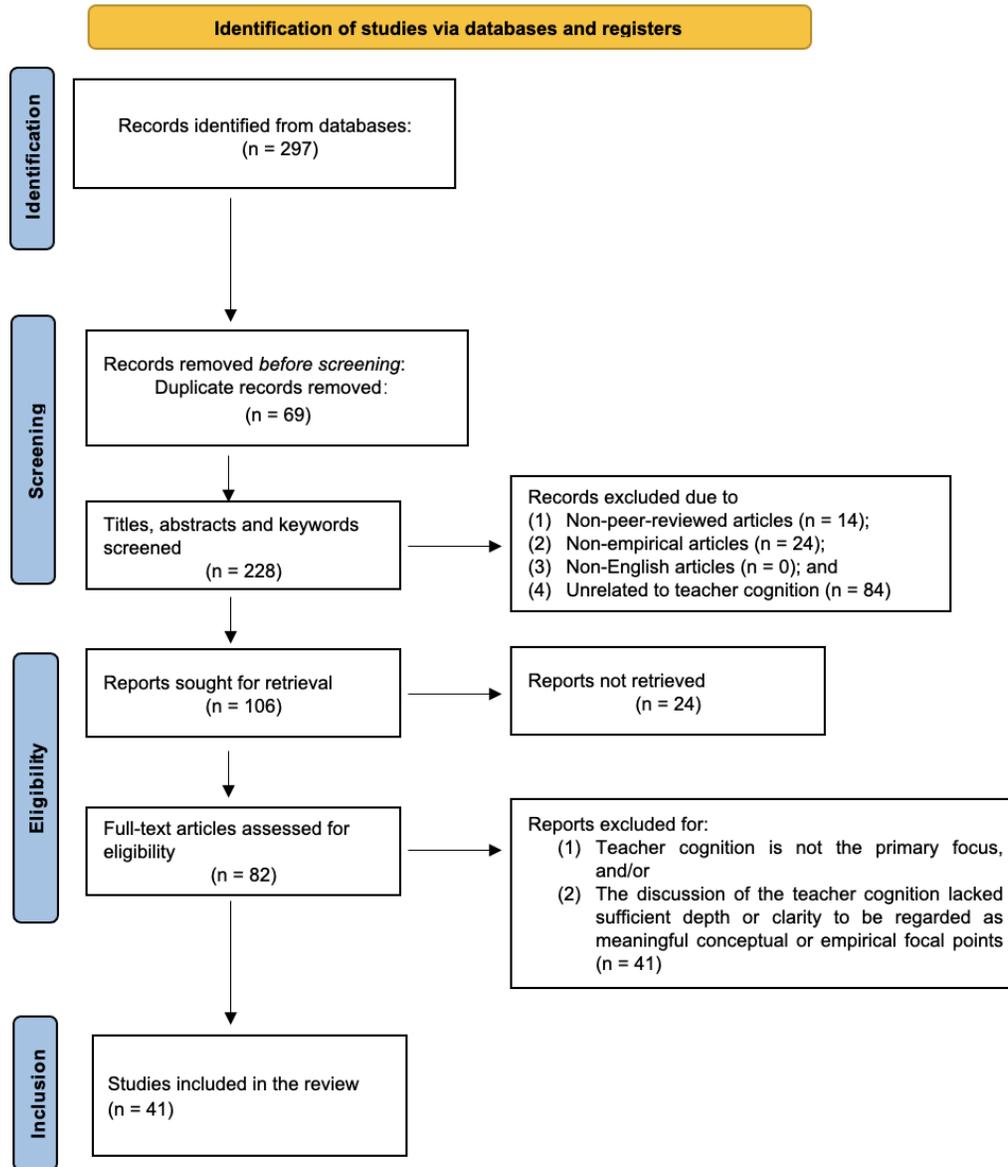


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow chart of articles search and selection process

3. Findings

A total of 41 empirical studies on LTC were identified, published between 2016 and 2025 (see Appendix), including the year and country of publication, research focus, participants and context, methodology, and key findings. An analysis of publication trends reveals a sustained scholarly interest in LTC over the past decade. Notably, the output has remained steady, with distinct peaks in publication volume observed in 2016 (n = 6) and a resurgence in 2023 (n = 6) (see Figure 2). The review seeks to gain insights into how existing studies address the core dimensions of teacher cognition, its connection with practice, the range of influencing factors, and the pedagogical implications.

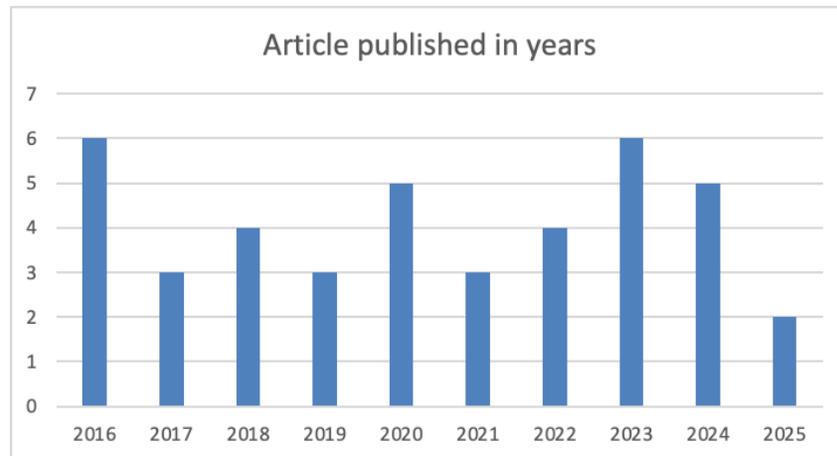


Figure 2. Distribution of publications during 2016-2025

3.1 Conceptualizations of Language Teacher Cognition

3.1.1 Nature of Language Teacher Cognition

Most studies describe LTC in terms of teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions toward language teaching (e.g., Abad, 2023; Buss, 2016; Li & Liu, 2024; Liu, 2024a, 2024b; Moodie, 2016; Sun & Zhang, 2021), which reveals the attitudinal perspectives of teachers' roles and pedagogical approaches. For example, studies on grammar instruction (Sun & Zhang, 2021) show that both novice and experienced teachers commonly believe in teaching grammar through communicative, form-focused instruction rather than through traditional, rule-based methods. Similarly, research on pronunciation teaching (Buss, 2016) highlights teachers' positive attitudes toward emphasizing communicative purposes and intelligibility. However, these attitudes can vary significantly across different contexts, such as between EFL and ESL settings.

A second strand conceptualizes LTC as teacher knowledge (e.g., Glaser & Martínez-Flor, 2025; Rahimi, Zhang & Esfahani, 2016; Yagiz, 2018), which reflects teachers' understanding in EFL teaching. For instance, Glaser and Martínez-Flor (2025) framed teacher cognition in terms of knowledge, showing that while a preservice teacher's pedagogical content knowledge and confidence improved through practicum experience, her limited subject-matter knowledge of L2 pragmatics highlighted the need for stronger theoretical preparation in teacher education. Research in this tradition views LTC as a set of mental representations and organized professional knowledge resources.

LTC has also been framed in terms of teacher identity (e.g., Lim, 2016; Montakantiwong, 2024). Lim (2016) showed that non-native English-speaking teachers, rather than internalizing a sense of inferiority to native English-speaking counterparts, accepted their own pronunciation and accents, which empowered them to construct legitimate professional identities. Similarly, Montakantiwong (2024) highlighted identity as a dynamic process of negotiation and aspiration, where teachers exercise agency, engage in identity work, and draw on imagined ideal selves that motivate and shape their classroom practices. These perspectives highlight that teacher cognition is not only about what teachers know or believe but also about how they understand and position themselves as professionals.

3.1.2 Domain-Specific Focus of Language Teacher Cognition

The literature also reveals that LTC has been examined concerning specific domains of English language teaching, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of teachers' pedagogical reasoning and decision-making. As summarized in Table 1, these studies can be categorized into five primary foci: traditional language systems, language skills, pedagogical approaches, broader educational contexts, and general cognition studies.

Table 1. Categorization of Studies by Research Focus

Category	Sub-category	Number of studies
Language systems	Grammar	7
	Pronunciation	6
	Vocabulary	1
	Pragmatics	1
Language skills	Written corrective feedback	5
	Speaking & listening	2
Pedagogical practices	Curriculum design/innovation	2
	Critical thinking	2
	Learner autonomy	1
	Technology integration	2
Broader educational concerns	Global Englishes	2
	High-stakes testing	2
	Professional development	1
	Social justice & Equity	2
	Philosophy statement	1
General LTC studies	Influencing factors	4

A significant proportion of the research remains grounded in language systems, reflecting a persistent scholarly interest in how teachers conceptualize linguistic form. Within this domain, grammar (e.g., Ahmad, 2018; Basar, 2020; Graus & Coppen, 2017, 2018; Sun & Zhang, 2021, 2022; Zhang & Sun, 2022) and pronunciation (e.g., Buss, 2016; Georgiou, 2019; Gordon, 2023; Lim, 2016; Yagiz, 2018; Yunus, Salehi, & Amini, 2016) dominate the landscape. In contrast, other linguistic subsystems like vocabulary (e.g., López-Barrios, San Mart ín, & Villanueva de Debat, 2021) and pragmatics (Glaser & Martínez-Flor, 2025) have received comparatively scant attention.

Regarding language skills, the literature exhibits a notable imbalance. Research on writing and written corrective feedback is robust (e.g., Liu, 2024a, 2024b; Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019; Wei & Cao, 2020). Conversely, the cognitive dimensions of teaching oral skills, specifically speaking and listening, appear underrepresented (e.g., Abad, 2023; Rahimi & Ong, 2023).

In the realm of pedagogical practices, contemporary research has moved beyond basic instruction to explore complex curricular and cognitive challenges. This includes investigations into teachers' cognitions on curriculum design and innovation (e.g., Rahimi et al., 2016; Zhu & Shu, 2017), critical thinking (e.g., Li, 2016; Ma & Luo, 2021), and learner autonomy (e.g., Wang & Ryan, 2023). Furthermore, contemporary research on LTC is increasingly concentrating on the impact of technology integration (e.g., Gao & Zhang, 2020; Li & Liu, 2024).

Beyond these, emerging research has expanded the scope of LTC to encompass broader educational domains. These include Global Englishes (e.g., Behzadpoor & Mansouri, 2023; Montakantiwong, 2024), high-stakes testing (e.g., Allahyari, Abbasabady, Akhter, & Alibakhshi, 2023; Xin, Alibakhshi, & Javaheri, 2025), teacher professional development (e.g., Gao & Yang, 2022), philosophy statements (e.g., Tatar, 2024), and issues of social justice (e.g., Sulistyowardani, Mambu, & Pattiwael, 2020), and equity (e.g., Chen & Abdullah, 2022). Complementing these domain-specific studies is a strand of research focusing on general cognition, which examines the foundational factors, such as prior learning experiences, that shape a teacher's underlying philosophy (e.g., Moodie, 2016; Rahman et al., 2020). Collectively, these studies reflect the growing complexity and diversification of LTC research, indicating a broadening of its conceptual boundaries in response to evolving educational priorities.

3.2 The Relationship between Language Teacher Cognition and Practice

One of the most prominent themes across the reviewed studies is the misalignment between teachers' cognitions and their observed or reported classroom practices (e.g., Ahmad, 2018; Basar, 2020; Wang & Ryan, 2023; Sun & Zhang, 2021). For instance, teachers who expressed support for communicative grammar instruction often reverted to traditional, exam-oriented methods under institutional or curricular pressures (Sun & Zhang, 2021). Similar discrepancies were reported in written corrective feedback, where teachers preferred indirect or focused strategies but mostly provided direct, unfocused corrections due to workload and institutional expectations (Liu, 2024b; Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019; Wei & Cao, 2020). Likewise, studies on technology integration revealed moderately positive orientations but limited classroom application (Gao & Zhang, 2020; Li & Liu, 2024).

Conversely, there are also instances of alignment between cognition and practice, particularly when teachers work in supportive environments that encourage collaboration and reflective teaching (Rahimi & Ong, 2023). Interesting research from Zhu and Shu (2017) reveals that alignment between teacher cognition and classroom practice was evident during the pre-project, bottom-up, and post-project phases, where the teacher's beliefs were reflected in her instructional decisions. However, during the top-down and exam-driven stages, this alignment broke down. Such cases highlight that alignment is context-dependent and can be disrupted by institutional constraints and policy demands.

A smaller but important set of studies compared novice and experienced teachers, revealing that teaching experience significantly influences the degree of alignment between cognition and practice. Novice teachers often struggle to implement their beliefs, relying heavily on their apprenticeship of observation and finding it difficult to adapt to unpredictable classroom contexts (Liu, 2024b; Rahman, Singh, & Fersi, 2020; Tatar, 2024). In contrast, experienced teachers were better equipped to align pedagogical ideals with real-world

conditions, drawing on broader instructional abilities and deeper reflective practices (Rahimi & Ong, 2023; Sun & Zhang, 2022).

3.3 Factors Influencing Language Teacher Cognition and Practice

At the individual level, a foundational factor shaping LTC is teachers' prior schooling experiences (e.g., Mohammadabadi, Ketabi, & Nejadansari, 2019; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2017; Wei & Cao, 2020), often referred to as the "apprenticeship of observation" (Rahman et al., 2020). These early experiences, formed through years of observing teaching as students, significantly shape teachers' implicit beliefs about instruction (Graus & Coppen, 2017, 2018; Liu, 2024a). Tatar (2024) reported that negative language learning experiences prompted Turkish preservice teachers to adopt more communicative, student-centered approaches in contrast to their own traditional schooling. In contrast, Moodie (2016) showed that teachers' negative experiences as language learners sometimes acted as constraints, limiting their ability to implement communicative methods. In another example, Rahman et al. (2020) found that both positive and negative apprenticeship of observation experiences significantly shaped novice teachers' beliefs and practices. Similarly, personal schooling histories and cultural values influenced orientations toward social justice (Sulistiyowardani et al., 2020) and pronunciation teaching (Gordon, 2023; Lim, 2016).

At the professional level, both preservice and in-service training strongly influenced LTC (e.g., Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2017; Tatar, 2024). Studies such as those by Öztürk and Gürbüz (2017) and Glaser and Martínez-Flor (2025) highlight how formal pedagogical training and practicum experiences help teachers develop more critical perspectives. In-service studies revealed that teachers often sought additional training, particularly in specific areas such as pronunciation (Buss, 2016; Yagiz, 2018) and test (Allahyari et al., 2023). In the case of Gao and Yang (2022), one teacher's 28-year professional journey showed how advanced coursework and continuing education gradually reshaped her pedagogical thinking and broadened her instructional method.

At the contextual level, curriculum mandates, exams, and resource limitations frequently mediated the gap between cognition and practice (e.g., Abad, 2023; Chen & Abdullah, 2022; Mohammadabadi et al., 2019). High-stakes exams, for instance, often compel teachers to revert to traditional methods, even when their personal beliefs favor more communicative approaches (Sun & Zhang, 2021; Zhu & Shu, 2017). Similarly, teachers' understanding and application of concepts like critical thinking can be fragmented due to an overemphasis on examination-driven educational traditions (Li, 2016; Ma & Luo, 2021), and their feedback practices are often shaped more by institutional expectations and heavy workloads than by pedagogical ideals (Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019; Ngo, 2018). Furthermore, a lack of resources and adequate professional training frequently hinders innovation, particularly in areas like curriculum design (Rahimi et al., 2016) and pronunciation instruction (Georgiou, 2019). Beyond these core limitations, additional factors like varying student proficiency (Liu, 2024b; Yunus et al., 2016), lesson and class setting (Basar, 2020; López-Barrios et al., 2021) and local educational policies (Li & Liu, 2024; Xin et al., 2025) also play a significant role in shaping how teacher cognition is translated into classroom actions.

3.4 Implications for Teacher Education and Professional Development

3.4.1 Teacher Education

Several studies highlight the need for teacher education programmes to better prepare preservice teachers for the complexities of language teaching (e.g., Allahyari et al., 2023; Buss, 2016; Georgiou, 2019; Gordon, 2023). Teacher education should also incorporate reflective tasks that allow preservice teachers to connect past experiences with future aspirations and engage critically with their developing cognition (Ma & Luo, 2021; Tatar, 2024). Equally important is the congruence between the theory taught and the methods used by educators. Scholars argue that teacher educators must not only teach theoretical concepts but also model pedagogical practices that are consistent with those concepts, since mismatches can create confusion and hinder conceptual change among student teachers (Graus & Coppen, 2018; Rahimi et al., 2016). Also, programs need to be flexible to adapt to sociocultural and contextual realities. Training content and pedagogical approaches should be adapted to local needs and institutional constraints, ensuring that innovations are both meaningful and sustainable in practice (Behzadpoor & Mansouri, 2023; Montakantiwong, 2024).

3.4.2 Professional Development

Beyond preservice preparation, the reviewed studies highlight the critical role of continuous professional development (PD) in sustaining teachers' growth and adapting their practices to demands. Studies recommend regular workshops, seminars, and collaborative networks to strengthen teachers' pedagogical skills and to provide opportunities to exchange effective classroom strategies (Georgiou, 2019; Sun & Zhang, 2021, 2022; Zhang & Sun, 2022). Specialized training in areas where teachers often feel underprepared, such as pronunciation, has been identified as a pressing need for many teachers (Buss, 2016; Georgiou, 2019). PD should also engage with teacher identity and equity concerns, supporting teachers in negotiating their professional roles within globalized and local contexts (Chen & Abdullah, 2022; Lim, 2016; Montakantiwong, 2024). In addition, long-term collaboration between schools and universities has been recommended as a sustainable form of PD. Such partnerships not only provide teachers with mentoring and continuous support but also allow teacher education programs to adjust in response to the practical needs of practitioners (Rahimi et al., 2016).

4. Discussion

Following a systematic examination of the existing literature on LTC, the findings highlight four key themes that have been investigated by researchers across various contexts.

The first major finding confirms that the conceptualization of LTC has undergone a significant evolution. While earlier studies tended to treat cognition as a static set of beliefs or knowledge, many recent works understand it as socially shaped, deeply connected to teachers'

identities (e.g., Lim, 2016; Montakantiwong, 2024), and influenced by the contexts in which they work. This shift supports the view that teacher cognition follows a non-linear trajectory (Ngo, 2018), as cognition is not a fixed set of rules but is shaped by a dynamic relationship with the environment (Li, 2020). This more holistic view is vital because it helps explain why deeply held beliefs can be resistant to change; they are not just ideas, but part of who the teacher is. Another significant shift is the diversification of LTC research into areas like technology and educational equity, which demonstrates the field's maturation. This expansion shows that researchers are no longer just concerned with the cognitive underpinnings of traditional pedagogical skills. Instead, they are tackling how teachers think about and navigate the complex, evolving realities of modern education.

Regarding the relationship between cognition and practice, this review confirms that a misalignment remains a common theme. Many studies found that while teachers support communicative or student-centered approaches in theory, they often use traditional teacher-centered methods in practice (Sun & Zhang, 2021; Liu, 2024b). However, characterizing this gap simply as an inconsistency overlooks the reality of the classroom. A critical look at the findings suggests that this misalignment is often a rational coping strategy. Teachers are frequently caught between the pedagogical theories learned in university and the harsh realities of their schools, such as high-stakes exams and heavy workloads. Consequently, when teachers align their practice with realities rather than their beliefs, they are adapting to survive in their environment. This indicates that practice is not just a reflection of a teacher's competence but is heavily constrained by the school context. In contrast, when the environment is supportive and collaborative, teachers are much more successful at acting on their beliefs.

Another important insight concerns the strong influence of teachers' former learning experiences on their thinking. Critically, the review identifies a key difference between novice and experienced teachers. Novice teachers often rely on their past experiences because they lack teaching strategies to handle classroom pressure. In contrast, experienced teachers are better able to deal with contextual constraints. As observed in comparative studies, experienced teachers can effectively align their instruction with their beliefs, even in difficult contexts. This suggests that professional expertise is not just about time spent in the classroom; it is about developing the reflective skills necessary to filter past experiences and adapt to present challenges.

Finally, the implications for teacher education point to a systemic issue. The review identifies a recurring disconnect between teacher preparation programs and the reality of EFL classrooms. The recurring demand for targeted training in under-resourced areas suggests that current programs remain too theoretical and fail to address the specific challenges teachers face daily. Moreover, training often overlooks local contextual constraints, leaving teachers ill-equipped to adapt their beliefs to their actual working environments. To bridge this gap, the field must move beyond short-term workshops toward long-term school-university partnerships, which can provide the continuous, situated support necessary for teachers to cope with the complex demands of the profession.

5. Conclusion

This review examined 41 empirical studies on LTC in EFL contexts published during the past decade, guided by four interrelated research questions concerning the primary foci, the link between cognition and practice, the range of influencing factors, and pedagogical implications. The findings reveal a maturing area of inquiry. The conceptualization of LTC has evolved from a purely cognitive focus on beliefs and knowledge to a more holistic, sociocultural understanding that incorporates teacher identity. Concurrently, the scope of research has broadened from traditional pedagogical skills to address complex educational issues. Yet, a persistent misalignment between cognition and classroom practice remains a defining theme, shaped by prior experiences, teacher education, and contextual factors. Furthermore, the analysis uncovered a strong consensus across the literature regarding necessary reforms in teacher education and professional development.

Despite these valuable insights, this review is subject to several limitations. First, the analysis was limited to English-language publications, which may exclude regionally significant research in languages other than English. Second, the reviewed studies were predominantly conducted in Asian contexts, especially China. Studies from the Middle East also appear more frequently than those from underrepresented regions such as Europe and Latin America, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Third, the evidence base was heavily weighted toward qualitative case studies, with fewer longitudinal, large-scale quantitative, or mixed methods designs, thereby narrowing the methodological perspectives captured.

To advance the field and address the above limitations, the following suggestions for future research are recommended. There is a clear need for longitudinal research that tracks the evolution of teacher cognition across different career stages. Large-scale, cross-cultural comparative studies are also lacking, which could uncover how sociocultural and institutional factors shape cognition in diverse EFL contexts. Additionally, more theory-driven interventions should be explored to examine how professional development programs can effectively address the persistent gap between teacher cognition and classroom implementation. Finally, research into underexplored domains of LTC, such as literature in education, critical digital pedagogy, and equity-oriented practices, remains limited and warrants further attention.

By systematically addressing these gaps, future research can enhance the conceptual robustness, methodological diversity, and practical relevance of teacher cognition studies in EFL contexts. This review thus contributes to consolidating current understandings while offering a forward-looking agenda for the continued evolution of LTC as both a theoretical and pedagogical force.

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Authors' contributions

Wei Zhong was responsible for designing the study and drafting the manuscript. Dr. Hanita Hanim Ismail was responsible for shaping the overall direction of the research and providing critical revisions to the manuscript. Dr. Azlina Abdul Aziz assisted with proofreading of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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Appendix

An Overview of the Empirical Studies on Language Teacher Cognition

Author(s) & Year	Focus	Participants & Context	Method(s)	Major findings
Buss (2016)	To uncover teachers' beliefs and practices regarding pronunciation	60 EFL teachers; Brazil	Mixed methods	Teachers held generally informed and positive beliefs about pronunciation teaching, but tended to use traditional, word-level, repetition-based methods focused on problematic sounds. Most desired more training in pronunciation pedagogy.
Li (2016)	To investigate teachers' cognitions on integrating thinking skills	Quantitative: 473 EFL teachers; Qualitative: 18 teachers; China	Mixed methods	Teachers had fragmented and limited understanding of thinking skills, though generally positive attitudes towards integration. They doubted thinking skills should be specifically promoted in language classrooms. Integration was influenced by curriculum focus, class time, and textbooks. Immediate teacher training is needed to enhance knowledge and pedagogical skills regarding thinking skills teaching.
Lim (2016)	To explore teacher cognition regarding pronunciation instruction	3 pre-service non-native English teachers; Cambodia	Qualitative	Four key themes emerged: (1) teachers' self-perceived pronunciation competence, (2) their pedagogical goals centered on intelligibility, (3) eclectic instructional approaches influenced by both local norms and international models, and (4) evolving attitudes toward ASEAN English as a legitimate lingua franca. Findings challenge the dominance of native-speaker norms in Cambodian ELT and highlight the sociocultural construction of teacher beliefs.
Moodie (2016)	To explore the influence of teachers' prior negative language learning experiences on beliefs and practices	18 in-service English teachers; South Korea	Qualitative	Teachers' own public school English learning experiences served as negative models; limited experience with communicative methods hindered their adoption; teacher education must foster critical reflection to reshape their beliefs.
Rahimi, Zhang & Esfahani (2016)	To investigate teachers' cognitions about curriculum design and teachers' roles	40 non-native English-speaking EFL teachers	Mixed methods	Finding shows that no significant difference between novice and experienced teachers' cognitions about curriculum design. Both groups felt underprepared theoretically and practically, with limited time and resources, mostly adapting materials rather than designing. Both groups expressed a strong need for school-university partnerships and ongoing support for

				responsive teacher education.
Yunus, Salehi, & Amini (2016)	To explore L2 teachers' cognitions of English pronunciation teaching	5 EFL teachers and their students; Iran	Mixed methods	Teachers' cognitions about pronunciation techniques were closely related to their teaching experience. More experienced teachers in higher-level courses had broader understanding of both pronunciation techniques and learner characteristics.
Graus & Coppen (2017)	To investigate student teachers' cognitions about grammar teaching and how these relate to learner-oriented beliefs	74 undergraduate and postgraduate EFL student teachers; Netherlands	Qualitative	Student teachers largely supported explicit, isolated grammar instruction as essential for both accuracy and communicative competence. Their cognitions were mediated by learner-oriented beliefs, such as learner autonomy, motivation, cognitive abilities, and preferences, revealing complex, dynamic interactions between pedagogical and learner-related considerations.
Öztürk & Gürbüz (2017)	To explore the sources of teacher cognition and its enactment in classroom practice	3 university-level EFL instructors; Turkey	Qualitative	Teacher cognition was shaped by multiple interrelated sources: prior learning experiences, pre-service education, early teaching experiences, and contextual factors such as learner profiles and institutional policies. These cognitions strongly influenced classroom practices.
Zhu & Shu (2017)	To discuss teachers' cognitions on curriculum innovation	10 secondary English teachers; China	Qualitative	Teacher cognition and practices changed over the innovation timeline, with alignment during pre-project, bottom-up, and post-project stages. However, cognition-practice incongruence occurred during top-down and exam preparation stages, likely due to external pressures from mandates and high-stakes exams. Implications for curriculum innovation highlighted.
Ahmad (2018)	To discuss teacher cognition in grammar teaching	Qualitative: 60 nonnative EFL university teachers; Qualitative: 8 teachers; Saudi Arabia	Mixed methods	No significant difference in teachers' beliefs across mother tongue and gender; however, teachers' beliefs and practices were inconsistent (at odds), indicating weak teacher cognition in grammar teaching.
Graus & Coppen (2018)	To investigate student teachers' cognitions on grammar teaching	16 student teachers; 10 teacher educators, and 6 school placement mentors; Netherlands	Qualitative	Curriculum incongruences (in secondary education and teaching practice) unintentionally reinforced traditional grammar cognitions among student teachers. The dichotomy between disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge caused confusion and consolidation of traditional views.
Ngo (2018)	To investigate second language writing teacher cognition	One EFL writing teacher; Vietnam	Qualitative	Teacher cognition about L2 writing changed in a complex, non-linear way, mediated by humans, concepts, and artifacts. Developed two models illustrating cognition development and its socially mediated, dialectical nature.
Yagiz (2018)	To investigate teachers' cognitions about L2 pronunciation	164 English teachers; Turkey	Mixed methods	Teachers were confident in their knowledge of English pronunciation but focused mainly on segmental aspects and transcription. They valued correct pronunciation but largely neglected suprasegmental features in teaching. Need for professional development in pronunciation instruction and assessment was identified.
Georgiou (2019)	To explore English teachers' cognitions, challenges and practices about pronunciation	98 Greek-Cyprus EFL teachers	Quantitative	Older teachers valued pronunciation less than younger teachers. All groups faced similar challenges, such as limited time and lack of training. Pronunciation teaching practices were similarly limited across all age groups. Calls for enhanced pronunciation teaching in Cyprus.
Mao & Crosthwaite	To investigate teachers' beliefs and practices on	5 English writing teachers; China	Mixed methods	While teachers generally expressed a preference for focused, indirect WCF to promote learner autonomy, analysis of their

(2019)	written corrective feedback			written feedback revealed inconsistencies: most provided unfocused, direct corrections. The misalignment was attributed to contextual constraints such as institutional expectations, heavy teaching load, and assumptions about student preferences.
Mohammadabadi, Ketabi, & Nejadansari (2019)	To explore factors influencing teacher cognition	62 Iranian EFL teachers	Qualitative.	Multiple interconnected factors influence LTC at various ecological levels: microsystem (e.g., teaching facilities, mood), mesosystem (prior experience, collaboration), ecosystem (appraisal criteria, curriculum), macrosystem (government attitudes, religious beliefs). LTC results from combined effects across levels. Recommendations include improving technology, fostering collegiality, and clarifying appraisal criteria to support positive teaching beliefs.
Basar (2020)	To explore EFL teachers' beliefs and practices regarding grammar teaching	EFL teachers; Turkey	Qualitative	Teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching are shaped by coursebooks, teaching experience, lack of theoretical knowledge, and preference for communicative methods. The relationship between beliefs and practices varies by individual, influenced by experiential and contextual factors.
Gao & Zhang (2020)	To explore EFL teachers' cognitions about online teaching	3 EFL teachers; China	Qualitative	Teachers demonstrated evolving cognitions about online teaching, recognizing both its advantages and limitations. Their ICT literacy developed through practice and responsiveness to students' needs. Findings emphasize the importance of adapting traditional methods to online platforms, offering insights for global contexts.
Rahman, Singh, & Fersi (2020)	To explore the influence of apprenticeship of observation on teacher cognition and early instructional practices	2 novice EFL teachers; Bangladesh	Qualitative	Findings revealed that both positive (AO) and negative (anti-AO) prior learning experiences significantly shaped the teachers' professional beliefs and classroom practices. The trajectories of teacher cognition were individually distinct, rooted in their personal schooling histories.
Sulistyowardani, Mambu, & Pattiwael (2020)	To investigate teachers' cognitions on social justice	Two high school EFL teacher; Indonesia	Qualitative	Teachers' schooling experiences, curriculum demands, and personal beliefs influenced their integration of social justice. However, incongruences were found between teachers' stated cognitions and their actual classroom practices.
Wei & Cao (2020)	To discuss university EFL lecturers' cognitions and self-reported strategies for written corrective feedback	254 university EFL lecturers; Thailand, China, and Vietnam	Quantitative	Teachers used high-demand, low-demand, and no-demand feedback strategies based on student proficiency levels. High-demand strategies were linked to training and contextual factors, while low-/no-demand strategies related to prior learning and teaching experiences. Notable mismatches were found between beliefs and reported practices.
López-Barrios, San Mart ín, & Villanueva de Debat (2021)	To investigate EFL teachers' beliefs on vocabulary teaching	2 EFL teachers; Argentina	Qualitative	Teachers' vocabulary teaching practices partially aligned with their stated beliefs. Contextual factors such as lesson setting and class characteristics influenced teaching decisions. Findings support that both beliefs and context shape instructional practices.
Ma & Luo (2021)	To explore preservice teachers' cognitions on critical thinking	24 EFL teachers; China	Qualitative	Teachers showed partial understanding of critical thinking, with some misconceptions, but were willing to integrate it into TEFL despite challenges. Sociocultural factors (previous learning, cultural values, evaluation systems) significantly influenced their cognitions.
Sun & Zhang (2021)	To investigate teacher cognition about form-focused instruction	4 University-level EFL teachers; China	Qualitative	Teachers cognitively favored focus-on-form (integrating grammar and meaning) but shifted to focus-on-forms (isolated grammar) in practice. This shift was influenced by

				sociocultural factors such as traditional Chinese beliefs and institutional pressures. Highlights the tension between cognition and practice in language teaching.
Chen & Abdullah (2022)	To investigate EFL teacher cognition and practices in promoting educational equity	EFL teachers; China	Qualitative	Highlights the critical role of EFL teachers as agents of equity. Emphasizes the dynamic interplay between teacher cognition and classroom practice, shaped by both experiential and contextual factors. Calls for more empirical studies and offers practical implications for stakeholders interested in equity in education.
Gao & Yang (2022)	To explore teachers' cognitions about professional development	One tertiary-level EFL teacher; China	Qualitative	The teacher demonstrated clear cognitions about her professional growth, influenced by teaching experience, in-service training, administrative roles, reflective practice, and cultural wisdom from Chinese classics. The study highlights key mediating factors in teacher development.
Sun & Zhang (2022)	To explore cognitions and practices of novice and experienced Chinese EFL teachers on form-focused instruction	4 university EFL teachers; China	Qualitative	All teachers expressed positive cognition toward focus on form instruction. However, only experienced teachers effectively implemented it in practice. Novices showed a theory–practice gap, indicating a need for targeted teacher education to support sustainable development in form-focused pedagogy.
Zhang & Sun (2022)	To discuss EFL teachers' cognitions on grammar teaching	2 sub-samples of EFL teachers (n=315 and n=215); China	Quantitative	The validated TCAGTQ questionnaire consists of 27 items across six factors with good reliability and validity. It serves as a useful instrument for assessing and reflecting on EFL teachers' grammar teaching cognitions in Chinese university contexts.
Abad (2023)	To explore teachers' beliefs in listening instruction	50 ESL teachers; Ecuador	Mixed methods	Teachers' listening practices focus more on task completion and product-oriented outcomes rather than on developing listening skills or decoding processes. There is a mismatch between beliefs and actual teaching.
Allahyari, Abbasabady, Akhter & Alibakhshi (2023)	To explore EFL teachers' cognitions towards language test	210 EFL teachers; Iran	Quantitative	Teachers had partial awareness of social and psychological consequences of high-stakes tests. Training workshops significantly enhanced teachers' understanding of both positive and negative test consequences. Findings highlight the value of professional development in test literacy.
Behzadpoor & Mansouri (2023)	To explore novice EFL teachers' cognitions about Global Englishes pedagogy	2 novice EFL teachers; Iran	Qualitative	Despite theoretical awareness of GELT, both teachers preferred using standard American or British English in practice. This reflects a persistent theory–practice divide and underscores resistance or challenges in operationalizing Global Englishes pedagogy in classroom contexts. Implications for teacher education and curriculum reform are discussed.
Gordon (2023)	To investigate nonnative English teachers' cognitions of pronunciation instruction	One experienced EFL teacher; Costa Rica	Qualitative	The NNST's pronunciation teaching was shaped by previous teaching/learning experiences, context, and learner characteristics. The study highlights how NNSTs can effectively implement explicit pronunciation instruction and informs teacher training.
Rahimi & Ong (2023)	To explore teachers' cognitions on English speaking and students' engagement	5 expert teachers and 79 students	Qualitative	Expert teachers demonstrated detailed and integrated knowledge of speaking instruction, effectively translating cognition into practice. Students perceived teachers as caring, which fostered group cohesion, learner agency, and high engagement (agentive, behavioral, cognitive, emotional,

				social).
Wang & Ryan (2023)	To discuss EFL teachers' cognition and practice for promoting learner autonomy	9 EFL teachers; China	Qualitative	Teachers' practices both facilitated and constrained learner autonomy. While opportunities to shift control existed in everyday tasks, they were nuanced and fragile. Teachers' perceptions revealed tensions between pedagogical ideals and contextual realities. The study underscores the complexity of fostering autonomy in non-Western settings.
Li & Liu (2024)	To investigate Teachers' cognition and practices regarding social media integration in language teaching	Quantitative: 119 English teachers Qualitative: 7 teachers	Mixed methods	Revealed a notable perception-practice gap: teachers held moderately positive beliefs about social media's pedagogical value but demonstrated limited implementation in practice. This gap was shaped by a multi-layered system of influences, including individual affective factors, schooling experiences, institutional norms, and broader societal expectations.
Liu (2024a)	To investigate English teachers' beliefs and practices on formative writing assessment	One EFL teacher in a public secondary school; China	Qualitative	The teacher effectively used formative writing assessment to develop beginner-level students' writing skills. Various contextual and personal factors influenced her assessment decisions. The study offers practical recommendations for teachers and educators.
Liu (2024b)	To discuss development and implementation of novice transborder teachers' beliefs about written corrective feedback	2 novice transborder EFL teachers in public secondary schools; China	Qualitative	Teachers' WCF beliefs were shaped by prior learning experiences and local teaching contexts. Despite strong beliefs, belief-practice mismatches emerged, especially in choosing direct vs. indirect feedback, due to contextual constraints. The study underscores the need for improved L2 writing pedagogy in teacher education.
Montakantiwong (2024)	To examine teachers' cognitions and identity in relation to Global Englishes (GE) perspectives	7 in-service EFL teachers in two universities; Thailand	Qualitative	Teachers' understandings of GE deviated from GE scholarship; tension between teachers' identity goals and GE "role model" image shaped enthusiasm/resistance to change; conceptual mismatch emerged as a barrier; positioning teacher identity as central is vital for GE-informed teacher education.
Tatar (2024)	To explore EFL teachers' cognitions in teaching philosophy statement	30 preservice EFL teachers; Turkey	Qualitative	Preservice teachers' cognition centered on pedagogical and interpersonal teaching aspects, marked by idealism. Their prior experiences shaped their views, but teacher education helped develop a more critical perspective on these experiences.
Glaser & Martínez-Flor (2025)	To trace English teacher's development in teaching L2 pragmatics	One pre-service primary English teacher; Spain	Qualitative	Teacher's cognition evolved from fragmented knowledge and uncertainty to integrated pedagogical content knowledge, increased professional confidence, and awareness of learner knowledge. Cognition development was shaped by coursework, practicum experience, and emotional engagement.
Xin, Alibakhshi, & Javaheri (2025)	To explore EFL teachers' cognitions of high-stakes tests	30 university EFL teachers; China	Qualitative	Teachers held diverse, nuanced cognitions. Positives included educational accountability, curriculum alignment, student motivation, and teacher development. Negatives included narrowed curriculum, teaching to the test, inequity, test anxiety, and teacher burnout. Cognitions were deeply influenced by the contextual and emotional impacts of high-stakes testing.