

Students' Opinions about Reflection Journals

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Abstract

Reflection journals are an activity that can enable students to develop various skills through habitual writing practice. In this study, 55 first-year university students from two debate and two writing online EFL classes were the participants. For a 12-week period, students were assigned a weekly reflection journal with prompts concerning the contents of the lesson, self-assessment of their performance, and goal-setting for the next lesson. The data was collected in the form of a final reflection journal for lesson 13 at the end of the semester. The themes that appeared in the data about reflection journals are related to writing skills, reflection, and self-awareness. Additionally, there was an increase in most learners' writing output, a better understanding of the lessons' contents, and more motivation to achieve their goals. Though most learners wanted to do the activity in the future, some did not. Their data concerned time, the level of difficulty, and forgetting the contents written from the previous lesson's journal.

Keywords: *goal setting, journal writing, learner autonomy, reflection, self-regulated learning, student motivation*

1. Introduction

According to Benson (2011): "Reflection is a complex construct" (p. 104). It is not simply remembering an event but bringing that event into the present for examination. Writing journals can aid in reflecting (Hashemia & Mirzaeib, 2015, p. 104). In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lessons, for learners reflection journals for lessons can act as a multifaceted tool based on the prompts the journal contains. For instance, journal prompts can ask learners not only to recall what was taught in the lesson, but to ask them to assess their performance, set learning goals, determine ways to achieve those goals, and possibly help increase their motivation. Such prompts can act as scaffolding to help the learners to accomplish reflection. Questions to assist the learners with this potentially challenging activity could be asking them to recall the contents taught, what they knew previous to the lesson, about challenging points presented, and how the topics may help them in their future. The prompts can allow the learners to have more control over their learning, thus being an activity that can foster learner autonomy. The practice of looking back at a lesson and then writing about it would seem to not only cause the learners to remember what is learned, but to decide what points that they assign priority to.

For EFL instructors, reflection journals can be an effective way for instructors to assess their learners' performance in lessons as instructors can construct the journals to grade writing ability, confirm that the learning points were understood, and remembered. In online lessons, this can be valuable particularly for educators who have limited experience with this teaching style. Some students may be reluctant or feel overwhelmed to articulate a summary of the lesson or about any unclarity of the lesson's contents in a foreign language. This may be further exacerbated when the learner is asked to share in the foreign language under study to the instructor and in front of the class. A possible alternative to this, is implementing reflection journals as they can be a site for students to concretely share their responses to such instructor inquiries. Additionally, setting

reflective journal writing as a weekly task can develop the learners English writing skills through practice as well as create a writing routine. This qualitative study will share university students' responses about how reflection journals affected their English language proficiency, goal-setting, motivation, and their advice on ways to improve the activity.

2. Literature Review

Reflection or self-reflection is a practice with multiple benefits to aid learning other than just recalling the topic under study. Benson (2011) argues the complexity of reflecting as being layered with an introspective, retrospective, or prospective process that is context-bound and goal-oriented (p. 106). Learners' self-reflection period can be a time for assessment on their performance, and if their goals were fulfilled which can shape the way they perform in the future (Panadero, 2017, p. 3). Reflection can also foster autonomous learning as the learners gain awareness about their learning conduct and how that influences the achievement of their learning goals (Benson, 2011, p. 109). In all fields of study ranging from sociology to education to mathematics, self-reflecting aids in learners' growth in development (Hashemia & Mirzaeib, 2015). However, it seems that EFL and reflection has limited data about its practice and benefits.

Journal writing can be a useful tool to guide learner self-reflection as well as encouraging self-regulation, self-knowledge, and potentially motivation in learning. Self-regulated learners need to set their goals, decide learning plans, monitor their process, and evaluate their performance (Cheng, 2011, p. 2). For university students, particularly first-year students, self-regulated learning could be an important foundation to the start of this period of their lives, providing them with more opportunities to prepare for adulthood by making choices and encouraging lifelong learning after graduation. In regards to learner motivation, writing reflection journals can also be a positive influence. According to Dörnyei's (2003) framework for motivational teaching practice, the following was listed: "1. Creating the basic motivational conditions; 2. Generating initial student motivation; 3. Maintaining and protecting motivation; and 4. Encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation" (p. 23). Journal writing can be a tool for this as it is a venue for students to share their opinions and experiences (Hashemia & Mirzaeib, 2015, p. 104). Moreover, reflection journals can contain questions or prompts related to self-assessment. As instructors, Cheng states: "Teaching is not just about providing students with knowledge but also about helping students to develop their intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy and enhance their learning values" (2011, p. 2). Reflection journals can play a significant role as instructors create environments for shaping learners into self-regulated learners with intrinsic motivation to learn.

In Japan research about reflection and EFL has been done in the past, such as with Bray and Harsch 1996's article *Using reflection/review journals in Japanese classrooms*. Two more recent studies have also been performed. A study by Yabukoshi (2020) had participants at a Japanese university use reflection journals in their English class with the concrete goals of their TOEIC test scores before and after the semester (p. 758). However, this study only had four participants, so it seems reflection journals and EFL learning in Japan would benefit from more research especially in cases where the goals are more abstract. Another study done in a Japanese university by Morita (2020) also used reflection journals to collect data from 78 participants. Students were given prompts to write about the lesson's details, or their emotions or thoughts during the lesson (Morita, 2020).

Additionally, though 10 years have passed since *Teaching and Researching Autonomy's* publication (Benson, 2011), there still seems to be limited research on reflection's influence on language learning, for instance, on what and how the learners focus their reflections. Research regarding reflection journals in EFL settings is an area requiring further exploration.

3. Methods

The self-reflection journals were used in online lessons. Over the 16-week semester of fall 2020, from lessons 2 to 13, students were required to write a self-reflection journal as a task that needed to be completed outside of the lesson and submitted by the end of the day for each weekly lesson. Online lessons were as learner focused as possible with an aim to incorporate both input and output skills. However, it was challenging to assess what students felt that they gained from learning. Reflection journals were implemented for the instructor to better understand students' opinions and to grade their participation through the submission and evaluation of answering the prompts, understandability, and formatting. In lesson 1, students were given a sample by the instructor of a reflection journal through an online-learning platform. Explanation about formatting reports was also presented in lesson 1 using the writing textbook *Becoming a Better Writer* (2017). The textbook was also reviewed in future lessons based on the learners' needs.

The prompts followed a pattern of a review of the class, self-assessment, goal-setting, and writing skills development to encourage self-regulated learning. The majority of prompts remained unchanged and to guide students to write about the lesson. In lesson 2 and 3, no required word count was required. See *Appendix A & B* for lesson 3's tasks for both classes with prompts and rubrics. However from lesson 4, at least 100 words were required which gradually increased to 150 to 175 words by lesson 12. See *Appendix C & D* for lesson 11's tasks for both classes with prompts and rubrics. The instructor mainly focused on assessing if the formatting was done correctly, all prompts were answered, and the required word count was met. Common formatting errors were shared in the lesson as well as individually on the online-learning platform during the grading process. If the word count was below the requirement, comments were also made to the learners on the platform. The reflection journal was an activity where the students decided what was given priority such as the lesson content that was included in their summaries, how they self-assessed their performance, and their goals for the next lesson. Self-determination of the content also provided students with more opportunities for self-regulated learning.

Research Questions

1. Which English skills did writing reflection journals help the students to develop?
2. What was their opinion about writing reflection journals and did they have a previous experience with writing reflection journals?
3. Did the journals help students with remembering the lessons?
4. Did writing goals in their journals motivate students to achieve those goals?
5. What was the learners' feedback about the activity?

Participants

The participants consisted of 55 first year students from four mandatory EFL classes at a liberal arts university in Tokyo. Two were debate classes with a total of 26 of the 35 students consenting to the study. Two were writing classes with a total of 29 of the 40 students consenting to the study. Both debate classes and one writing class had learners with TOEIC scores from 280 to 479. The other writing class had TOEIC scores from 480 to 699. All online classes had lessons once a week for 100 minutes. Both mandatory classes in fall term were continuations from the spring semester, with discussion class progressing to debate class, and reading class progressing to writing class. This ensured that students had the opportunity to develop English input and output skills. Being that this was their second semester and based on their TOEIC scores, it appeared that all students should be able to write their journals in English.

Instruments

The second-last lesson of the term is when the data was collected from students in the form of their lesson 13 reflection journals. These journals were also submitted through the online-learning platform. See *Appendix E* for the prompts. As with the other reflection journals, students received a score but were told that their participation in the study would not affect their score. It was further explained that this journal was for the instructor to learn more about how to better implement the activity for future classes. Selected and unedited student responses will be shared in the next section.

5. Results

The lesson 13 reflection journal entries of 55 students were analyzed for themes. On average, each student wrote 172 words with the highest word count at 309 and the lowest at 103. All journal entries were completed in English. Though some errors appeared, the answers were understandable and some entries will be referred to unedited. The following subsections detail the most frequent themes and the number of times that they appear in the journal entries as well as the samples of the students' responses.

Question 1

For question 1, all students answered that writing journals helped to develop their English skills. For writing skills, 53 of 55 students agreed, with the majority stating these following themes in the order of their frequency: the development of writing proficiency appearing 38 times, the creation of a writing habit appearing 25 times, and writing opportunity appearing 7 times. In addition students shared other skills that were also developed: reading appearing 5 times, speaking appearing twice, creativity appearing once, and thinking appearing once. Below is a selection of student responses:

That's because before this class started, I didn't have custom to write English sentence, so I changed my custom regarding writing English.... Also, I could get imagination skill because I must consider sentence when I was writing journal.

From writing skill's point of view, in reflection journal, we should write over the 175 words every week. So, we have more chances to write English. Therefore, I can write the English sentences better

than ever. And I have been looking up words when I write the reflection journal. So, my vocabulary increases... And from speaking skill's point of view, I can speak English well because of my increased vocabulary.

Writing reflection journals helps with my English writing skills because it was very difficult for me to write reflection in English, but I am able to write it quickly little by little.

Question 2

For question 2, 49 of the 55 students answered that their opinion of the experience of writing reflection journals was positive. Their reasons are these most predominant themes which are listed in the order of their frequency: the development of writing proficiency appearing 20 times, reflection of the learning process appearing 16 times, analysis of their performance appearing 13 times, and a challenge of their abilities appearing 6 times. Five students answered the experience was negative with the majority writing it was either time consuming or there was time pressure with the deadline. One student answered that the experience was both negative and positive, while two students did not answer. Below is a selection of student responses:

It is because by writing a sentence, I was able to reconfirm my thoughts. Also, even if I do to write English in another class, I think that I can write smoothly by using the English writing method I learned in the Reflection Journal. By writing about class, you can organize the learned content.

My experience with reflection journals has been positive because I could practice to write English paper. I didn't have many opportunities to write long English sentences. The reflection journals were great opportunities for me.

Experience with reflection journals has been negative because I'm not good at writing English. I took 1-2 hours to write to it.

This is because I was very busy when I have a part-time job on Wednesday. I would like the deadline to be by Thursday [instead of Wednesday].

Only three students had previous experience writing reflection journals. One responded that it was in the previous semester's English discussion class, another responded that it was in a Japanese class, and the last responded that it was in an unspecified class.

Question 3

For question 3, writing reflection journals helped most students to remember the lesson's contents with 49 of 55 students responding positively. Their reasons are these most predominant themes which are listed in the order of their frequency: an opportunity to review appeared 48 times, time to process what is learned appeared 13 times, and analysis of their performance appearing 3 times. One student answered that writing journals did not help with remembering the lesson, while five students did not directly answer the question. Below is a selection of student responses:

I think that I can write smoothly by using the English writing method I learned in the Reflection Journal. By writing about class, you can organize the learned content.

I think it help me remember the things that were taught. When I wrote it, I read this class textbook and remember what teacher and friends said.

Writing about class was helpful for me to remember the things that were taught because I had to review them. I checked things I learned and the textbook's page. As a result, I looked at the textbook twice in one lesson, and I remembered better.

Thanks to this, I will never forget the opinion that everyone was saying. I was able to summarize the weaknesses in the class.

Writing about the class don't help me remember the things that were taught. Some can be remembered without writing, others cannot.

Question 4

In regards to learning goal setting and motivation to achieve the goal, 40 of 55 students answered positively. Their reasons are these most predominant themes which are listed in the order of their frequency: analysis of their performance appearing 15 times, awareness of their goals appearing 15 times, and clarity of their goals appearing 12 times. Below is a selection of student responses:

I think writing a goal for the next class give you more motivation or energy to do the goal. By reflection on the class, I remember what I could not do and try to do it next time.

Moreover, writing a goal for the next class give me more motivation or energy to do the goal. It is because once I have set goals, I was able to know what to do in advance.

Writing about the class and a goal for the next class helped me remember the things that were taught and give more energy to do the goal because the goal was clear and it was easy to settle by reviewing.

Also, writing a goal for the next class give me motivation to do the goal. Because, I could find my faults and make an effort until the next class.

The number of students who answered that writing journals did not help with motivation were 14. Eight students wrote that their goals were forgotten, so the goals could not be achieved. Appearing one time each were the themes of repetitiveness, unawareness, and unnecessary to write goals in the journals. Below is a selection of student responses:

Writing a goal for the next class didn't give me more motivation or energy to do the goal. That's because I kept trying to learn and understand the things that were taught without writing a goal.

Writing a goal for the next class don't give me more motivation or energy to do the goal. It was always the same goal.

No, my motivation didn't increase, because I forget my goal in the next class.

Question 5

Student feedback about the activity for the instructor was directly answered by 53 of the 55 students. Their feedback was extremely beneficial as it was the instructor's first time to use the activity. There were 42 students who responded that they wanted to do the activity again. The reasons for their positive response are in the themes that appeared most frequently: the development English proficiency appearing 19 times, time to process what is learned appearing 14 times, analysis of their performance appearing 7 times, and providing motivation appearing 4 times. Below is a selection of student responses:

I'd like to do class journals in other class because this journal can help me with my English skills.

I wrote about the class in a reflection journal. This reminded me of what I learned. Because I remembered the lesson to write this, and I was able to review it by looking at the textbook. I also wrote the goals for the next lesson each time. I think writing this has boosted my motivation. Because I was able to take classes with my own goals in mind. Considering these things, I thought it would be better to write a reflection journal in other classes as well.

I would like to do reflection journals again in other classes. Because to remember the class by writing is good to get good study motivation.

I want to do this task in other classes as well. The reason is that I realized my growth.

There were 11 students who responded that they did not want to do the activity again. The most frequent themes are as follows: the activity was too challenging for their abilities appearing 4 times, time consuming appearing 3 times, and the format was too restrictive appearing twice. Below is a selection of student responses:

I would not like to do reflection journals. Because it was very hard to finish on that day. I think it is good to reduce the total number of words.

Reflection journals have many merits, but I would not like to do reflection journals again in other class. I'm not good at writing in English, so it is hard to write every week.

I don't want to do a reflection journal if it's the same shape[format].

I didn't know what to do next time, so it was difficult to set goals for the next lesson. I think this homework is very meaningful, but the deadline was tight because the class day was a busy day with part-time jobs. So I don't really want to do this in another class.

6. Discussion

The most frequently appearing themes were the development of writing proficiency, the creation of a writing habit, a writing opportunity, an opportunity to review, reflection of the learning process, time to process what is learned, analysis of their performance, a challenge of their abilities, awareness of goals, and clarity of the goals. These themes can be further simplified into writing skills, reflection, and self-awareness. Other areas to consider about the reflection journals are its level of difficulty, time issues, and the necessity for review.

Firstly, the themes related to writing skills could be categorized as the development of writing proficiency, the creation of a writing habit, and writing opportunity. As students were required to submit their journals on a weekly basis for a 13-week period, they were probably able to develop their writing skills with this habitual practice. As the word count increased from 100 to 150 words for the writing class and 175 words for the debate class, the expectation of writing more was presented. It seemed that for debate classes, due to multifaceted skills that were taught, it was less challenging for most learners to write more words as the lesson tasks were more goal-based. Additionally, there was less instructor-speaking time, and more learner speaking, listening, reading, and writing time about possibly more engaging topics. For instance, students as a group had to prepare for a debate based on a student-generated proposition by researching the topic, deciding their argument, debating, and observing other classmates' debate. Each class ended with comments from both the instructor and the classmate observers of the debate regarding each group's performance. In contrast, the writing

class' topics may not have been as engaging and there was more instructor-speaking time than in the debate lessons. Hussien et al. (2020) recommend giving learners freedom in the writing topics of reflection journals (p. 3493). However, it may be either that the students may be uncertain about what is appropriate to write about or share too freely about topics that are unrelated to the class if no prompts are provided. It seems that incorporating more opportunities for learners to connect with the topics in the writing class, such as with short pair or group discussions, could help them to increase their writing output or word count in their reflection journals. This may also aid in decreasing the level of difficulty of the task if the learners have a greater connection to the topics. However, it seems that the topic under study may have a considerable influence on increasing writing output based on learners' interest and engagement, particularly for online learning.

Secondly, the themes related to reflection could be categorized as an opportunity to review, reflection on the learning process, and time to process what is learned. By giving students time to process the lesson's contents, they can absorb those contents, then determine the points that they feel to be significant, and record them in the reflection journal. There was concern that extending the deadline may cause the students to forget the lesson's contents, thus the learners were expected to submit their journal before the end of the lesson's day at 23:59. "Reflection leading to action can be understood as a cognitive basis for control over learning management" (Benson, 2011, p. 106). To create an environment to do so, an overly restrictive deadline may not permit learners to accomplish a deep and meaningful reflection. Therefore, based on the comments provided by some learners that the day of the lesson for submission created too much stress, future lessons with reflection journals will extend the due date.

Thirdly, the themes related to self-awareness could be categorized as the analysis of their performance, a challenge of their abilities, awareness of their goals, and clarity of their goals. In the study by Yabukoshi (2020), TOEIC test scores were used as concrete goals aiding in determining the potential effectiveness of reflection journals with the before- and after-writing journals' scores as a measurement (p. 763). The goals were very concrete with test scores, however, this study does not examine the actual goals set by learners. Additionally, in this study there was little guidance given to students about how to set and accomplish learning goals. With debate class, since feedback was given from the instructor and students about the group's performance, for those learners it may have been more clear if their learning goals were achieved. However, it could be that too much outside influence may cause learners to feel less confident in setting their own goals. It seems that based on future uses of the activity, the learners' responses to the goal-setting prompts will indicate whether guidance is necessary and if the instructor should give suggestions based on the lesson's learning objectives. In the data, some learners responded that after writing about their learning goals, these goals were forgotten by the next lesson.

As most learners felt that writing reflection journals was a positive activity, it will be used in other classes. With future reflection journals, the students will be encouraged to review their journals either before or at the start of the lesson. Since this was the instructor's first time to use reflection journals as well as to teach online, gathering data from learners has proven to be beneficial in shaping future applications of this activity.

7. Conclusion

Reflection journals in EFL lessons can be an effective tool for not only developing learners' writing skills, but for potentially fostering learning autonomy and increasing motivation through goal-setting to increase self-regulated learning. In addition, with a shift to online learning, these journals can be beneficial to instructors to better understand their students' comprehension of the lesson's contents and objectives. Self-reflection journals can also be a measurement of the success or failure of the lesson's learning goals. Soliciting learner feedback about the activity is useful for shaping journals that are more meaningful with tasks that are achievable. Self-reflection journals and EFL is a research area for further examination.

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Appendix A

Debate Class Reflection Journal Lesson 3

After each class, you will write a class reflection journal due the day of the class before 23:59 as a Self-Study Task. Please use the following prompts to help you:

1. Summarize the main points learned in class.
2. What did your team do well in the debate? (Please give reasons and examples)
3. What did the other team do well in the debate? (Please give reasons and examples)
4. What can your team do to improve the debate?
5. What is important when **making rebuttals**?
6. What is important when **judging a debate**?
7. A goal for the next class.
8. Include the word count. (Write over 100 words in your paragraphs).

IMPORTANT: Answer the prompts in full sentences and in paragraph form on the next page. If you do not do this you can only get 1/5.

***Remember to use page 8 and 9 of "Becoming a Better Writer" to format your journal correctly.*

REFLECTION JOURNAL GRADING INFORMATION: 5 POINTS		
Prompts 2 POINTS	Understandability 1 POINT	Formatting 2 POINTS
All prompts were answered	Ideas could be understand	Formatted correctly (<i>BBW</i> page 8-9)

Appendix B

Writing Class Reflection Journal Lesson 3

After each class, you will write a class reflection journal due the day of the class before 23:59 as a Self-Study Task. Please use the following prompts to help you:

1. Summarize the main points learned in class.
2. Information you already knew before class and when you learned about it.
3. Information that you just learned about in the class.
4. Surprising or interesting things you learned in the class.
5. Something surprising or interesting a classmate or classmates said in the class.
6. Ways the information will help you in university and/or in the future.
7. Any points that you do not know or understand about the topic.
8. Anything else you would like to share about.
9. A goal for the next class.
10. Include the word count.

***Remember to use page 8 and 9 of "Becoming a Better Writer" to format your journal correctly.*

REFLECTION JOURNAL GRADING INFORMATION: 5 POINTS		
Prompts 2 POINTS	Understandability 1 POINT	Formatting 2 POINTS
All prompts were answered	Ideas could be understand	Formatted correctly (<i>BBW</i> page 8-9)

Appendix C

Debate Class Reflection Journal Lesson 11

After each class, you will write a class reflection journal due the day of the class before 23:59 as a Self-Study Task. Please use the following prompts to help you:

1. How did your team members do in the debate? What were your team's strong points? What were your team's points to improve?
2. How did the team you debated against do in the debate? What were the team's strong points? What were the team's points to improve?
3. What did you do well in the debate? What do you want to do differently in the next debate?
4. Did your team or the team you were debating against win the debate? (Please give reasons and examples about organization, argumentation, rebuttal and presentation style).
5. What was most interesting or surprising about this lesson?
6. Did your opinion about gender inequality change after the debate? Why or why not?
7. What is important when judging a debate?
8. What do you think can be done to improve gender inequality? For example, what can individuals do, groups, communities, countries, the world?
9. A goal for the next class.
10. Include the word count. (**Write over 175 words in your paragraphs**)

***Remember to use page 8 and 9 of "Becoming a Better Writer" to format your journal correctly.*

REFLECTION JOURNAL GRADING INFORMATION: 5 POINTS		
Prompts 2 POINTS	Understandability 1 POINT	Formatting 2 POINTS
All prompts were answered	Ideas could be understood	Formatted correctly (<i>BBW</i> page 8-9)

Appendix D

Writing Class Reflection Journal Lesson 11

After each class, you will write a class reflection journal due the day of the class before 23:59 as a Self-Study Task. Please use the following prompts to help you:

1. Summarize the main points learned in class.
2. Surprising or interesting things you learned in the class.
3. Any points that you do not know or understand about the topic.
4. Which English skill or skills did you use the most in class (reading, writing, listening or speaking)?
5. Which English skill or skills did you use the least in class (reading, writing, listening or speaking)?
6. Prompt specific to the a textbook topic
7. Prompt specific to another textbook topic
8. A goal for the next class.
9. Include the word count. Write over 150 words.

***Remember to use page 8 and 9 of "Becoming a Better Writer" to format your journal correctly.*

REFLECTION JOURNAL GRADING INFORMATION: 5 POINTS		
Prompts 2 POINTS	Understandability 1 POINT	Formatting 2 POINTS
All prompts were answered	Ideas could be understood	Formatted correctly (<i>BBW</i> page 8-9)

Appendix E

Debate and Writing Classes Reflection Journal Lesson 13

After each class, you will write a class reflection journal due the day of the class before 23:59 as a Self-study Task. Please use the following prompts to help you:

1. Did writing reflection journals help with your English skills (writing, reading, listening, speaking)? If yes, which skills and why? If no, why not?
2. Have you done reflection journals in other classes before? If yes, when and for what class?
3. Has your experience with reflection journals been positive or negative? Why? For example?
4. Did writing about the class help you remember the things that were taught? Why or why not?
5. Did writing a goal for the next class give you more motivation or energy to do the goal? Why or why not?
6. Would you like to do reflection journals again in other classes? Why or why not?
7. Do you have any advice about writing reflection journals?
8. Anything else that you would like to share related to reflection journals.
9. Include the word count.

***Remember to use page 8 and 9 of "Becoming a Better Writer" to format your journal correctly.*

REFLECTION JOURNAL GRADING INFORMATION: 5 POINTS		
Prompts 2 POINTS	Understandability 1 POINT	Formatting 2 POINTS
All prompts were answered	Ideas could be understood	Formatted correctly (<i>BBW</i> page 8-9)