Enhancing Receptivity in EFL Classrooms: Exploring Teacher Development Opportunities Through Follow-up Reflective Diaries

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Abstract

In recent years, reflective practices in education have received plentiful attention as a powerful learner-development tool in the general and language education fields. This action research demonstrates ample potential benefits of self-reflective activities in the language classroom from the teacher development perspective through qualitative analysis of students' study journals in a speaking English as a second language tertiary classroom. This study indicates learners' awareness of their learning progress using journal writing as a medium of self-reflection on their language skill development and overall learning progress. It provides additional insights into the language learning process, such as learners' perception of the above, which includes goal-setting ability, learners' self-analysis of learning challenges, and self-motivation. The discussion and conclusion sections highlight the embedded potential of the reflective entries that fulfill a function as a background source for curriculum planning with objectives and activities adjusted to learners' needs that, overall, can serve as stimuli for a deeper and more effective learning process.

Keywords: *Learner development, Teacher development, Self-reflection, Learning diaries, Pedagogical implications*

Introduction

It is an active research project designed to demonstrate the benefits of self-reflective activities in the language classroom from the teacher development perspective through a qualitative analysis of students' study journals in the English as a foreign language (EFL) tertiary environment. It offers additional channels to enhance receptivity in the language classroom through the perspectives of learner reflection.

Research Objectives
The main objective is to explore the ways students' reflective diaries shed light on Japanese college students' learning process by analyzing the nature of the diary entries and their contribution to the improvement of pedagogical procedures. To deepen educators'

comprehension of the immense role of learners' involvement in the teaching process through self-reflective diaries (Little, 2007), which were investigated using a mixed method approach, the following research questions were asked:

1. What is the nature of the reflective journal entries?
2. How can the knowledge gained from diary entries be applied in the planning/teaching process?

The diary entries of college Japanese students majoring in English were analyzed based on the adoption of metacognitive features from Ellis (1999) and Sinclair (1999): analysis of the subject matter, learner awareness, and learning process awareness.

Theoretical sources indicate a strong connection between the implications of the self-reflective practice and enhanced receptivity to the learning contents in the EFL setting. The recognition of its significance for learners' empowerment, encouragement, and responsibility for learning is undeniable: it can naturally activate engagement with learning material, deepen comprehension, and reinforce critical and autonomous thinking (Belobrovy, 2018).

This study investigates the additional function of reflective practices, which is enhancing the receptivity of the material by sustaining teachers' choices of approach, curricular goals, and activities. This study was conducted in a higher education context in Japan; however, the outcomes can be generalized to other such contexts.

Literature Review

Definitions of Reflective Activities in the Literature

Reflective activities are defined as "those intellectual and affective activities that individuals engage in to explore their experience, which leads to new understanding and appreciation" (Boud et al., 1985, p. 19). According to Dewey (1991), experience-based reflective activities can potentially serve as a critical role in learner-centered education as a self-activating learning medium imposed at the beginning but appreciated at the end.

Studies by Lew and Schmidt (2011), attempted to prove the existence of connectivity between reflective activities and enhanced academic performance by adopting the view of the above as an inaccurate process that improves over time and includes engagement in reflecting on the content of past learning experiences by the learners and leads to potentially higher academic achievements in the future.

Research on Journal Writing as a Self-Reflection Medium

Amulya (2004) emphasizes that written reflection can be a beneficial learning tool for gaining reflective experiences from the students' perspective and serving the educators. Park (2003) includes journals in the range of reflective activities that increase student interest in and engagement with course material, encourage and empower students to take more responsibility for their own learning, and allow them to have a voice and provide valuable feedback to the teacher. Such potential can provide irreplaceable information for pedagogical practices.

Metacognitive Learners' Benefits

Multiple studies throughout the years suggested a correlation between the implementation of prescriptive reflective activities and enhanced receptivity of learning material. Reflective activities can also help learners increase their metacognitive awareness of their own learning and master successful learning behaviors as a life skill (Sevilla & Gamboa, 2016). Watson (2001) identifies reflective activities as a tool imminent for a performance-enhancing learning environment where transmitted knowledge reflected upon serves as mutually gained experience and thus accumulates potential for shortening the distance between the instructor and the learners. He suggests that reflection offers the learners additional opportunities to "negotiate strategies and alter content" (p. 140).

Implications for the Educators: Pedagogical Benefits

Although learner-related benefits of reflective activities are fully captured in the literature with strong evidence of their efficacy, teachers' perspectives have been slightly less documented and implicit.

Reflection is seen as a disguised pedagogical tool that offers insights into language learning studies to target learner needs (Marefat, 2002). The learners are guided to examine their own behavior during class, i.e., introspection. If conducted correctly, such information can serve as an indicator of attitudes, needs, and the learning process, which is vital in the planning procedures. Cavilla (2017) notes the benefits of the infusion of reflective activities within the curriculum as they hold the potential to reveal the true meaning of the assignment at hand and its effectiveness in the acquisition process.

So far, research on reflective practices in EFL has focused on student and teacher performance (Klimova, 2015), with little attention paid to the potential value of learners' voices in broader pedagogical functions like curriculum planning. This study exemplifies student-generated pedagogical implications to maximize the impact of instruction.

Methodology

This study utilizes the qualitative method of data collection and identifies categories of analysis revealing the nature of the reflective entries with regard to pedagogical issues of teaching a course at the university level. The factors explored in the study aimed at improving teacher–student interaction, enhancing participation, and elevating the effectiveness of the language learning process.

Setting

The study was conducted in a private Japanese university in an undergraduate English language course targeting listening and speaking skills. Generally, the students enrolled in the course were second-year English majors. The primary objectives of the syllabus were to increase the independent ability of students to receive (listen), produce (verbal presentation), and interact in English. To achieve the learning goal and improve the level of production and quality of exposure, the students were engaged in a series of interactive pair and group activities during the course. A total of 11 student-participants enrolled in the course who had

scored an average of 500 on the Test of English for International Communication test and had intermediate levels of reading and writing skills. All the students acquired Japanese as their first language and had a similar history of English acquisition.

Procedure: Diary Writing

As the literature suggests positive outcomes of self-reflective activities such as diary and journal writing on the learning process (Amulya, 2004; Park, 2003), I chose reflective journals as the main source of analysis. Moreover, as the educator was the one to manage the class and simultaneously engage in the research activities in my case, journal analysis was the most accessible and feasible data source. The students were instructed to reflect in a freestyle at the end of each session. It was deliberately emphasized that all the self-reflective activities would not be graded. The participants of the study were introduced to the purposes of the research in class and willingly signed a formal participant consent form upon the approval of the institution.

Data Collection and Units of Analysis

The method of analysis chosen for this research was inspired by the study on promoting learner autonomy in the EFL classroom by Chuk (2003), which was centered on learner reflection. They include elements of metacognitive awareness described by Ellis (1999) and Sinclair (1999) as a starting point to define, eliminate, and measure learners' awareness of the learning process and identify those involving pedagogical implications. Journal entries were transcribed and analyzed. Each entry was categorized based on the dominant theme of the content. Influenced by Chuk (2003), the categories of analysis were coded as learners' awareness (LA), learning process awareness (LPA), and subject matter awareness (SMA) as shown in Table 1.

LA refers to entries containing pedagogical implications of students' self-awareness as learners in terms of attitudes, beliefs, motivation, needs, and learning styles. SMA implied the entries accommodating students' awareness of English as a system. LPA featured entries with students' awareness of learning process components such as self-assessment, goal-setting, monitoring progress, evaluating activities, and organizing time and resources (Chuk, 2003).

Table 1

Categories of Analysis

Awareness	Examples
Learner Awareness (LA)	Attitudes, beliefs, motivation, and learning styles
Subject Matter Awareness (SMA)	English as a Subject, recognizing metalanguage and referring to learning components and skills, speaking ability, listening comprehension, and others
Learning Process Awareness (LPA)	Self-assessment, goal-setting, monitoring progress, evaluating activities, and planning time for assignments

Findings

This section offers the answer to the first research question regarding the nature of the diary entries and introduces the findings elicited from the analysis of diary entries. The outcomes in Table 2 demonstrate the number of weekly entries dominated by one of the categories—SMA, LA, or LPA—per student over the 15-week course. As this is a small-scale study, the numerical values showcase the general tendency in a specific context and build a notion of engagement activity patterns but cannot be generalized without large-scale further research.

Table 2

Distribution of LA, SMA, and LPA Categories in Students' Diaries

Weekly Entries Dominated by Category	SMA	LA	LPA	Total:
S1	2	1	12	15
S2	1	1	13	15
S3	1	1	13	15
S4	0	0	15	15
S5	4	1	10	15
S6	0	3	12	15
S7	4	2	9	15
S8	3	0	12	15
S9	0	6	9	15
S10	1	2	12	15
S11	2	0	13	15
Total per Semester:	18 (11%)	17 (10%)	130 (79%)	165

As shown in Table 2, LA comments were the least prevalent among the participants, accounting for 17% of the total. Additionally, three participants did not share any comments concerning the LA category. The total average of SMA comments accounted for a slightly higher average of 18%. Similarly, three participants made no comments regarding SMA. The majority of entries belonged to the LPA with an average of 79%. The numerical values provide an additional layer of comprehension, add visibility, and can lead to a discussion on the connections between student-led reflection and teachers' professional development. As the numerical values are not sufficient to illustrate the major self-reflective tendencies, specific examples are given below to create sufficient evidence for the value of enhancing teaching practices discussed later in the study.

Learner Awareness

LA referred to entries containing pedagogical implications of students' self-awareness

of language skill development and learning difficulties recognized before and discovered through the course. Several entries were identified to include LA comments, with the two following dominating themes: acknowledging attitude and recognizing success (e.g., *I did my best* and *I tried to speak well*).

Subject Matter Awareness

SMA referred to the entries containing pedagogical implications related to the students' awareness of English as a system. The following themes of SMA comments were identified in the data:

1. Awareness of content and language needs
   I only use easy words, need to know more words
2. Awareness of delivery skill development
   Could know how to present
3. Awareness of skill development necessity
   I can't understand the listening

Learning Process Awareness

LPA referred to the entries with pedagogical implications from the perspective of students' awareness of learning process components such as self-assessment, goal-setting, monitoring progress, evaluating activities, and organizing time and resources. Three dominant components were detected:

1. Monitoring progress
   Group work is fun, should continue improve stress of words.
2. Self-assessment
   I can't say my opinion, but I wanted to. Not good at speed reading and not good at grammar.
   Have to make sentences but I can't. We think about leadership- difficult as I have no leadership.
3. Evaluating activities: feedback on the level of activity engagement.
   Fun - can talk about a lot of things. Class fun - role-playing is interesting. Enjoyed-share different opinions with friends. Could discuss many things.

The next section will focus on synthesizing the analysis of the findings and their relation to the main goal of this study: creating pedagogical implications for teachers' professional development.

Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

The limited literature sources indicated that self-reflective practices can be approached as a powerful tool with educational implications by making general suggestions to incorporate the above into pedagogical routines (Cavilla, 2017). This study supports the outcomes and

expands general recommendations into the EFL learning field by offering concrete enhancement strategies based on active research findings.

The results described in the above section indicate that within the specific learning environment, the students demonstrated a high level of enthusiasm and openness to share their earnest feedback toward the content of the activities and foresee their possible learning benefits from the tasks. The pedagogical enhancement opportunities derived from the knowledge accumulated in the study are as follows.

First, as the findings show that the participants were fully aware of their strengths and weaknesses as learners and appeared to be in full control of the learning process in terms of goal-setting, self-motivation, and planning, the first enhancement suggestion for the educators is to allow a high degree of student autonomy by positioning themselves as facilitators. In this regard, the students might benefit from a guided introduction to self-assessment and peer reviewing.

Second, concerning SMA, it appears that the learners described themselves as already possessing a steadily functioning language processing system, with a certain awareness of its components as well as their own language development needs. As these appear pre-existing, educators can focus more on their enhancement and further development by introducing new collaborative project- and task-based activities.

The third recommendation fell under the category of LA in the diary entries. Given the small number of entries as well as the limited range of comments, it appears that this is the weakest awareness of the three among the learners. There is a clear indication that the learners have limited awareness of their personal role in the learning process. This further means that even though they are fully aware of its process and subject, they fail to recognize their language ability and express low confidence and motivation. This may also be the reason that majority of LA entries featured effort rather than success, underlying the necessity of raising students' self-esteem in the language acquisition process. Therefore, educators can consider contributing to the adjustment of learners' goals according to their feedback by adopting language confidence-building strategies in lesson planning by introducing fluency-oriented activities rather than accuracy.

Based on these discoveries, the suggested role of the educator here is to find ways to greatly enhance LA functions through a focus on open-ended and communicative lesson design. A low LA can be supported not just by shifting the focus of lessons toward fluency activities but also, as mentioned earlier, by allowing a higher level of autonomy, adopting a facilitating role, and enhancing mutual trust between the learner and educator. In combination with the high existing levels of SMA and LPA, proposed applications from the data and further continuous self-reflection and analysis of students' comments could bring about new perspectives, as well as increased language gains for the learners.

Conclusions

This study was designed to contribute to the discussion on the extended benefits of learner reflection to language lesson planning, an area of high priority (Amulya, 2004; Park, 2003) but is under-researched. The results of this study contributed to a deeper understanding

of the nature of reflective diaries and identified the pedagogical implications associated with them. The diary entries revealed awareness in the areas of learners' motivation, language acquisition, and learning process management. The case is methodologically replicable and can lead to pragmatic outcomes that can offer additional insights into the mechanisms of educational enhancement of the language teaching process in other higher education institutions. Future studies can be extended to the influence of technology on the categories adopted in the study or the evaluation of curricular innovations.

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