

# Why Teachers Should Use Journals in Their Reflective Practice Throughout Their Teaching Career

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## Abstract

This paper reports on how a veteran English instructor with decades of teaching experience at the tertiary level benefits from and develops professionally by keeping and reflecting on a teaching journal. It describes how the instructor used her teaching journal to adapt to her new position as an adjunct lecturer for the Center for Foreign Language Education and Research (FLER) and improved her approaches to teaching English Reading & Writing 1 and 2 by reflecting on and comparing the first month of instruction of the English Reading & Writing 1 course in the spring semester to the first month of instruction in the English Reading & Writing 2 course in the fall semester. It demonstrates how keeping a teaching journal can be an essential tool for reflective practice and professional development for teachers at every stage of their teaching career, and how it can be particularly beneficial for teachers entering a new teaching context.

**Keywords:** *Reflective practice, Teaching journals, Professional development*

## My Context

I have taught English in Japan for over 35 years, 18 of which have been at the tertiary level. At my previous university, I began as a part-time instructor and eventually became an assistant professor on a limited contract. In addition to teaching required academic English courses to first- through third-year students, my administrative duties included coordinating the English language program for my department, developing materials and updating the curriculum, hiring and supervising part-time instructors, and other administrative tasks. It was a challenging position, but one I had become comfortable and confident in, which made the idea of starting a new job at a different institution extremely daunting. Even with decades of teaching experience, leaving my comfort zone at this point in my teaching career was both exciting and scary! My peers and colleagues reassured me that with all of my experience, I would have no problem adapting to my new teaching environment. Still, I had my concerns because it is, in many ways, harder to adjust and change one's practices after having spent so many years in the same job in the same place, and the anxiety that I felt was genuine. I couldn't help but wonder

if this “old dog” could still learn the “new tricks” necessary to succeed in my new position.

I last felt this “fear of the unknown” in the spring semester of 2020, when all university classes were moved online due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. My inexperience and lack of expertise in teaching online made me feel unsure of my practices—I was very much a fish out of water. During that time, I developed a critical friendship with a colleague at another university who was equally unnerved by the challenges of online teaching. As part of our critical friendship, we kept teaching journals to record our experiences and to facilitate our discussions. We met regularly online to support each other, a process that led to numerous epiphanies and helped both of us adjust to the new normal of online teaching. (Ueno & Yoshida, 2023). Because keeping a teaching journal was one of the keys to the success of our critical friendship, continuing to keep a teaching journal when I began at FLER made perfect sense. Bailey et al. (2001) point out that keeping a journal allows teachers to describe ongoing issues, vent frustrations, and clarify thoughts. As I was in a new environment and had yet to establish relationships where I felt comfortable consulting about my concerns and feelings, my journal became a vital tool to help me cope, adapt, and reflect on the successes and challenges of teaching in a new context.

## **Literature Review**

### **Reflective Practice and Teaching Journals**

Reflective Practice is a key component of language (and other) teacher development (see for example, Farrell, 2012). It has been long established that teachers keeping professional diaries/journals is one of the most meaningful ways of engaging in (language) teacher professional development (Bailey et al., 2001). However, a curiously recurring theme in the literature was how useful teacher journals are for novice/new/pre-service teachers. For example, nearly 50 years ago, Schumann and Schumann (1977) presented “the results of a secondary analysis of 26 diary studies by novice ESL teachers” in the USA, all of whom “had less than six months of prior teaching experience” (p. 241). Given the age of that paper, it may be that diary studies were not always considered to be good just for novice teachers. However, that does not seem to have been the case i.e., such an approach to teacher professional development still seems to be seen as good primarily for “the newbies” but not so for those of us with decades of classroom experience, i.e., the “veterans.” For example, Komur and Çepik (2015) analyzed “the positive and negative reflections of ten pre-service English teachers [in Turkey] who kept diaries on their own learning and teaching processes and daily lives” (p. 1593), concluding that such diaries could “provide an effective tool to gain insight into the pre-service English teachers’ learning and teaching processes” (p. 1593). More recently, but in the same vein, Altalhab et al. (2021) reported on “the reflective diary experiences of 50 “Saudi pre-service teachers who taught English in intermediate schools” (p. 173). This paper suggests that keeping a teaching journal can be an essential tool for reflective practice and professional development, even for,

and perhaps in some cases, especially for, veteran teachers.

My teaching journal follows a focused free-write format recommended by Stevens and Cooper (2009), which is “like a brainstorm that can list questions, concerns, insights, resources, interests, roadblocks, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, and ideas” (p. 139). Farrell (2019) suggests that writing in a journal regularly enables teachers to “identify and address issues critical to their practice within their teaching context, and, as a result, provide more learning opportunities for their students” (p. 86). For this study, I chose to focus on the Reading and Writing 1 and 2 classes because I would teach them in the spring and fall semesters, albeit with different students from different faculties. I wanted to see how reflecting on my practices after the first month of teaching Reading and Writing 1 in the spring semester would impact my approach to teaching Reading and Writing 2 in the fall semester. I wrote weekly about these courses in my teaching journal, responding to the following questions: What was the lesson plan? What went well and why? What could have gone better and why? What actions do I need to take in the future? When I reviewed my journal entries, I used the EAR model (Curtis, 2023) to reflect on my expectations, assumptions, and realities of myself, my students, and the Reading and Writing 1 and 2 courses as a veteran teacher entering a new teaching context.

## **Reflections Based on the EAR Model (Curtis, 2023)**

### **Self-Expectations as a Reading and Writing Instructor at FLER**

As a teacher with extensive experience at the tertiary level in Japan, I was confident I could adapt quickly to my new teaching context. However, I expected there would be some challenges because there were significant differences between the teaching position I was leaving and the one I was entering at FLER. For example, my previous institution’s reading and writing courses met twice weekly for two semesters and were taught by the same instructor. In contrast, the Reading and Writing 1 and 2 courses offered by FLER meet once a week for one semester, with different instructors for the spring and fall semesters. Even though the support materials for the Reading and Writing classes were helpful, I expected that it would be challenging for me to cover all of the items that were included in the syllabus because I was used to meeting with students to deliver the same type of course content twice a week rather than just once a week.

### **Assumptions and Realities During the First Month of the Reading and Writing 1 Course**

It has always been my practice to spend time on community-building activities during the first few lessons of any new course because community-building in the classroom is essential for high student engagement. The Glossary of Education Reform (n.d.) defines student engagement as “the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education.” Research on learning communities suggests

that students who feel part of a learning community can engage and reflect more actively and become more responsible and autonomous learners (See Berry, 2019; Sadera et al., 2009). Therefore, investing the time for community building has always been one of my top priorities.

However, my concerns about being able to cover the entire syllabus at a much faster pace than I was accustomed to led me to make certain assumptions about how things would go in my Reading and Writing 1 classes. These assumptions led me to make some counter-intuitive moves in how I planned and delivered the lessons. First, looking at the English program's curriculum as a whole and knowing that students would be taking the English Discussion course in addition to the Reading and Writing 1 course for their English requirement led me to the assumption that the cohorts for the discussion and Reading and Writing classes would be the same (which is not always necessarily the case). I therefore assumed that the students would be able to bond with each other quickly since they shared other classes. Based on that assumption and because I felt so pressed for time, I invested much less time in community building in my Reading and Writing 1 classes than I used to in my previous teaching context. The reality was that even though some students shared other classes, they were all first-year students trying to get used to university life. They needed more time to get to know each other and feel comfortable speaking in English in public. Because of this, it took longer to teach the course materials than I had expected because the students could not engage with each other in English as quickly as they would have had I placed more time and emphasis on community-building from the beginning of the course. Reflecting on the first month of the course helped me develop plans of action to spend more time on warm-up discussions and make the class more active and communicative to help the students bond.

Another assumption I made was that students could apply the discussion skills they were learning in their discussion class to the small group discussions we had in the Reading and Writing 1 course. Based on that assumption, I spent less time modeling, scaffolding, or explaining how to have practical small-group discussions in the Reading and Writing 1 class than I usually would. I made the mistake of simply providing the discussion questions and expecting the students to discuss without giving them enough scaffolding, which is something that, as a veteran teacher, I know never ends well! The reality was that the students had only begun learning discussion skills in their discussion classes, so they were not comfortable using the expressions even in their discussion classes, much less in other courses. Moreover, the discussions that the students were having in each discussion class were very structured and focused on specific content and particular discussion and communication skills, so it was overly optimistic for me to assume that they could apply those skills in a completely different context, particularly so early in the semester. Because I had not effectively shown them how to engage in discussion in the Reading and Writing 1 class successfully, the discussions we attempted during the first few weeks of the first semester were less successful than I had hoped, as I noted in my journal for week two:

While the students are keen and cooperative, the small group discussions could have gone better today. I reminded the students of the communication and discussion skills they had covered in Week 1 of their discussion classes, but they either couldn't remember or couldn't apply those skills effectively. They seemed hesitant to speak with each other in English. I shouldn't be surprised by that since I didn't give them enough time to chat and relax in English at the beginning of class, which I regret. I need to rethink my approach—spending the extra time to let students get to know each other and showing them how to engage in small group discussions would have made all the difference. I won't make that mistake again! (April 18, 2023)

### **Instruction of Reading**

During the first class, we discussed the value of improving our reading and writing skills in English as part of the course introduction. Although most of the students were frank about their general lack of interest in reading and writing in any language, they seemed impressed with the benefits of reading and writing that I presented, including improving their grammar, vocabulary, and critical thinking skills, and were surprised by the data that showed the amount of information that is written on the Internet in English (58.8%) as compared to the amount written in Japanese (3%) (Statista, 2023). In class, I instructed the students to take the Macmillan online reading assessment test to determine their most suitable reader level. I asked them to choose a reader (either digital or hard copy from the library) and be prepared to introduce it in the next class. I gave them some points to prepare (author's name, publication date, genre, why they selected that book, etc.). Although I assumed that some students would not be ready to do this in the following class, I expected that enough students would be prepared and that we could engage in small group discussions about the books we were reading. However, the reality was quite different from my expectations, as noted in my journal for week two:

I was excited to get the students talking about their readers, so I put them into small groups to introduce and discuss their chosen books. I modeled how to approach the group work with the reader I had chosen and listed prompts to help them explain their reader. I also provided follow-up questions that they should ask each other. The students did OK while modeling the task with me, but once I put them into groups, things went differently than planned for several reasons. First, although the students said they were ready with their readers, in reality, some had yet to choose their readers, so they were scrambling to connect to the online library to choose one. Then, even those who had chosen readers struggled to access them because of connectivity issues (although they had been instructed to download them before the class). The few students who had gone to the library and borrowed books were able to produce their books, but some had yet to begin reading and had mainly chosen the books because they “liked the cover.” We

spent much more time than I had planned for this activity which threw off the rest of the lesson plan. As always, I had a plan B and C for this class just in case the discussion went south, so all was not lost, but I felt deflated and regretted that I had not set up the activity better to ensure success. (April 18, 2023)

After reflecting on the less-than-successful discussion of the books we were reading, I decided to take a more proactive approach by creating a Google form that students were required to fill out weekly to chart their reading progress. Students had to report on the title, the author, the number of words, why they chose the reader, how many pages they read, the main ideas, and what they liked/disliked about the book. In this way, I could track their progress, and students could use the information they added to the form to discuss their readers with their classmates. After introducing the Google form, students were better at charting their reading progress but needed more scaffolding to engage in small group discussions. As the semester progressed, I organized the small group discussions by assigning each student specific roles (facilitator, reporter, note-taker, and contributor), which helped keep the discussions more organized and focused. I also provided handouts with instructions, useful language, and model answers, which kept the students on point and productive.

### **Instruction of Writing**

Teaching writing is something that I have enjoyed doing for many years, and I was excited about working with the students on their academic writing skills. In our first writing class, I carefully went through each step of the writing process, including brainstorming and forming clear topic sentences, organizing supporting sentences logically by giving reasons, examples, and explanations, and a clear concluding sentence that sums up the paragraph. We worked collaboratively as a class to create a paragraph on a familiar topic: Should university students do part-time jobs? This topic was ideal because all students had opinions, and I knew they would be comfortable talking and writing about it. My journal entry for week three was much more positive than in the previous two weeks:

Such great classes today! The students are starting to become more relaxed with each other, and rather than trying to warm up by talking about what they are reading (which has not gone that well in the previous classes), I decided to have the students warm up by talking about what they did on the weekend, and what their plans were for the upcoming Golden Week break. It was a relaxing and fun way to start the class and put students into the right frame of mind for the rest of the lesson. It reminded me that one should never underestimate the importance of the warm-up! I have been letting the time constraints of teaching these students just once a week get in the way of following the usual practices that had stood me well thus far in my teaching career. I'm not going to let that happen again! The whole lesson went as planned, and the students worked really

well together on their paragraphs! Let's hope I am on a roll now and have smooth sailing ahead! (April 25, 2023)

I was pleased with the first day of writing, but I realized in the following weeks that having class once a week rather than twice a week made a huge difference in students' retention of the materials, as indicated in my journal from week four:

Although we had a week off for Golden Week, I told the students that we would continue to work on paragraph writing after the break, so part of their homework was to review the writing skills we had covered. I created a quick review of the writing process with a fun, interactive whole-class quiz, but when I asked the first question: What are the three parts of a paragraph? and gave students a minute to consult with each other to confirm their answers, they could not come up with even one answer! From my experience, I know that students tend to retain only some of the information from previous classes, and there had been a week off between classes, but still!! (May 9, 2023)

After reflecting on the problem of the students' retention (or lack thereof) of the lessons, I decided to inform students that we would have short weekly review quizzes on the previous week's materials based on the slides that I posted every week to the LMS. I hoped this would encourage students to review more, which would help them retain the materials. Because of time constraints and to make the class more communicative, I did the quizzes orally with students working in groups. While this was lively and beneficial, I could not track each student's retention of the materials, so I needed to consider more strategies to tackle this particular issue.

## **Actions Taken in the First Month of Reading and Writing 2 Based on My Reflections From Reading and Writing 1**

The summer break provided some much-needed time to reflect further on my journal entries from the Reading and Writing 1 course and develop strategies to deliver more effective lessons in the Reading and Writing 2 courses I would teach in the fall. I was determined to address the areas I should have done better at the beginning of the first semester, starting with building a strong learning community with my new classes and teaching strategies for small group discussions to maximize group work productivity.

I decided that even though it was likely that the students knew each other better and were more accustomed to university life than in the spring semester, I wanted to make sure not to cut corners when it came to community building and taking time to get the students warmed up at the beginning of class. I reminded myself that students may not have spoken English since the previous week or spoken to each other in any language because they take different courses and have busy extra-curricular schedules and part-time jobs. Therefore, I designated enough

time for warm-up from day one of my Reading and Writing 2 courses. I gave students clear roles and responsibilities during the warm-up (and other small-group discussions) by assigning them specific discussion roles using laminated role cards (facilitator, reporter, note-taker, and contributor). On the first day of the new classes, I assigned the roles by visiting each table (5 groups of 4 students per group) and having students close their eyes and randomly pick a role card. While this method of assigning roles may not seem innovative, it created a moment of excitement for the students, and it allowed me to visit each group and briefly interact with the students directly from the beginning of the lesson. After the warm-up, all group members took a minute to help the reporter prepare to report to the class with a summary of the warm-up discussion. As noted in my journal for week two, spending time on the warm-up this way significantly impacted the class atmosphere:

I can't believe how big a difference using the laminated role cards in the warm-up makes! At the beginning of today's class, I gave hints to elicit the four roles for discussion that I had introduced in the previous week, and the students actually remembered! We had a huge laugh when I asked, "What do we call the leader of the discussion?" and one student shouted out, "Terminator!" rather than "Facilitator"! When I visited each group with the role cards, holding them face down and having the students randomly pick them, the reactions were hilarious! Students who pulled the contributor card were pumping their fists with joy, while those who pulled the reporter card shrieked with dismay! The warm-up set the tone for the rest of the lesson, which went great! The students were cheerful and engaged, which is an absolute win, especially for a Saturday morning class! (September 30, 2023)

By week four, I decided to put more responsibility on the students by having them assign each other roles for discussion. I had students do rock/scissors/paper in their groups, and the winner was responsible for assigning the roles and explaining why they had chosen each student for a particular role. I provided them with useful language, such as, "I want you to be the facilitator because you are a good leader!" "You should be the note-taker because you are good at listening!" I also taught them the expression "with great power comes great responsibility," as used in a recent Spiderman movie, which many knew. In this way, I was helping the students develop into more responsible and autonomous learners.

My approaches for teaching reading and writing skills during the first month of the Reading and Writing 2 course were based on my reflections from my journal entries from the Reading and Writing 1 course, with positive outcomes. Even within the first month of the course, students exhibited more confidence in their writing. They were able to use reading skills more effectively to gather information for their first essay, which asked them to give their opinion on why it is so difficult for Japan to achieve one of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of their choice. As I continue to write in my journal and reflect, I am discovering



more effective ways of instructing and supporting my students.

## Takeaways

Using a teaching journal to reflect on the first month of the spring and the fall semester as a veteran teacher in a new teaching context has improved my teaching practices. It has given me valuable insight into several areas that can benefit other veteran instructors entering a new teaching context.

First, the notion that veteran teachers can quickly adapt to a new teaching context should not be assumed. Even experienced teachers are “inexperienced” when their context changes. It may take some time for them to find their feet after entering a new institution, as every context is unique (Curtis, 2017). However, exposing one’s vulnerabilities to new colleagues can be challenging as a veteran teacher. Therefore, keeping a teaching journal can be an excellent way to record and reflect on one’s classroom experiences and express concerns and insecurities that are difficult to share with others when first joining a new institution. In my second semester at FLER, a colleague with more than 25 years of teaching experience in Japan, who had also begun teaching at FLER at the same time as I did, commented that all of her “good teaching tricks and habits went out the window” when she first came to FLER. It was something of a relief for both of us to realize that it is not uncommon, even for veteran teachers, to be overwhelmed and to have anxiety when entering a new teaching context (Mason, personal communication, October 18, 2023). This conversation reinforced the idea that journal writing, reflection, and collegial discussions are valuable forms of professional development at all stages of a teaching career.

Next, although the literature focuses mainly on the importance of pre-service teachers keeping a teaching journal, it is undeniable that it can also be an invaluable tool for reflection and professional development for all teachers, regardless of what point they are at in their careers. As pre-service teachers, we receive training and acquire fundamental teaching skills, but the time we spend in teacher training is finite. Lange (1990) states that “Teacher development is a term used in the literature to describe a process of *continual* intellectual, experiential, and attitudinal growth of teachers” (p. 250, emphasis added). Bailey et al. (2001) suggest that Lange’s definition is helpful because it suggests that development can and should continue throughout the teacher’s career. R, an expert teacher, stated: “I intend to go on teaching as long as I feel I can learn from my students and those around me. If I feel too self-confident, that there is nothing for me to learn, this will be my last moment as a teacher” (Olshtain & Kupferberg, 1998). These words are a core part of my teaching philosophy. Teachers who want to do their best for their students must be lifelong learners and continue to grow and develop professionally, regardless of where they are in their teaching careers (Ueno, 2023).

My teaching journal helps me to reflect on my teaching professionally and proactively. It allows me to celebrate my successes, reflect on what I can improve in my teaching, and develop a plan of action to ensure that I constantly and continuously develop my practices.

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