

Becoming Expert Learners Through Reflective Activities

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ABSTRACT

Reflective practice enables human beings to examine, evaluate, and understand their experience. As learners reflect and become aware of their own learning strategies, they are able to make better choices or actions in the future. This paper examines the potential of using a three-step reflective activity to promote students to become “expert learners” (Ertmer & Newby, 1996). Students answered the same set of survey questions based on motivation and anxiety three times throughout the semester, and reflected on why their answers changed or did not change throughout the semester. The paper illustrates how rapport in classrooms can have an effect on students’ engagements to reflective practice, and how open or willing they are to share their experience with peers.

INTRODUCTION

Reflection is a valuable activity which allows people to recall, examine, and evaluate their experience. Reflection in learning can enable learners to understand how an activity is related to their experience or goals as a bigger picture. Rogers (2001) supports the idea that reflection can be beneficial because it can lead to the learner understanding their own experience. Therefore, due to their increased understanding, a reflective learner may be able to make better choices or actions in the future throughout their academic career.

As learners engage in learning, some become better at monitoring their own learning and problem solving. This leads to learners becoming “expert learners”. Ertmer and Newby (1996) defines expert learners as ones who “display planfulness, control, and reflection; they are aware of the knowledge and skills they possess, or are lacking, and use appropriate strategies to actively implement or acquire them” (p. 1). Ertmer and Newby also support how expert learners are able to use knowledge they have obtained from themselves as learners to achieve learning goals. However, in order to do so, they caution that learners must be able to utilize “reflective thinking skills” to evaluate their experience and become aware of their learning strategies. Hence, the action of reflection is a critical connection between experience and the ability to control learning strategies.

Perhaps it is important to note that there are different types of reflection: reflection *on* action and reflection *in* action. In essence, these describe the act of reflecting on the past or the present, respectively. Whereas reflection on action happens after the fact and allows us to make sense of our past experience leading to current or future action, reflection in action takes place in the moment, requiring you to adjust and change as new information is taken in (Ertmer & Newby, 1996). In language learning classrooms, the former takes place more often because it is easier for teachers to prepare and structure the activity. Moreover, it requires less cognitive load on the learner. Reflecting in the moment requires awareness of the dynamic and fluid process, which could be a challenge if the learner is not trained in this method.

In this paper, I outline how an activity based on reflection *on* action can raise students’ understanding of learning strategies, specifically the affective aspect connected to them, and hence becoming expert learners with greater awareness of how they learn. The project emerged after I observed and reflected on classes I taught as an instructor during my first year at English Discussion Class (EDC). EDC is a mandatory class for all freshmen at Rikkyo University, which takes place once a week over two 14-week semesters with eight to nine students in each class (one in spring and another in fall). The course primarily focuses more on fluency than accuracy, and is

dedicated to fostering communicative English skills through micro-discussion activities (Hurling, 2012). In each lesson, students are required to participate in two extended English discussions (of 10 and 16 minutes) using the target discussion skills. As a strongly unified program, every class follows a similar lesson plan, whereby students practice using target discussion skills and receive feedback from the instructor. While students are typically encouraged to reflect on their use of discussion skills at some point in class, this generally takes place for no more than five minutes due to time restrictions. The limited time available for student reflection also means the focus of reflection tends to be on learning objectives for the day without much time to reflect on their personal experiences, emotions, or goals (i.e. their overall experience or growth throughout the semester). Another motivation to this project was how students had previously been struggling with anxiety or motivation throughout the course (Suzuki, 2018). Some students showed anxiety stemming from poor performance in class or negative attitude towards English, which often affected their motivation. As EDC is a compulsory course, some students lacked the motivation to prepare for lessons, which seemed to have often affected their performance in class. Following these observations, this activity was designed for students to reflect on action in hopes that the activity will connect to them becoming expert learners.

PROCEDURE

In fall semester of 2018, I implemented a three-step reflection activity in all nine low-intermediate (combined listening and reading TOEIC score of 280-479) and high-intermediate (combined listening and reading TOEIC score of 480-679) classes of EDC that I taught (72 students in total). Each step included an individual or group reflection activity. The aim of this activity was twofold – (1) to encourage students to become more aware and better able to assess their emotional reactions to discussing in English, and (2) to encourage students to become more aware of how they could approach similar situations differently in the future.

The first step of the activity was implemented in lessons 5, 9, and 13, when students were formally assessed through a discussion test. During class, students received the survey handout (Appendix A) and were asked to answer questions on a four-point Likert scale and write a free response for approximately 20 minutes. These lessons were chosen in particular since students must wait for 20 minutes while their classmates take the test. Prior to receiving the handout, students received an oral explanation that the handout was to help them *reflect* on their experience in EDC during fall semester. Students answered the same set of survey questions across all three lessons consisting of anxiety and motivation questions, and did not have access to their previous survey answers in lessons 9 and 13. Questions were taken from Wei's study (2007), which examined the relationship between anxiety and motivation of the learners. The survey questions were translated into Japanese, and students were allowed to write in Japanese or English about their thoughts and feelings towards class. The choice of writing in Japanese was given so that students had more freedom and less constraints during limited time. When filling out the surveys, students were asked to respond as honestly as they could, and were also reminded that their responses would not affect their grades in any way.

The second and final steps of the activity were implemented in the final lesson of the semester. For the second step, students received all three surveys they completed from the semester. Students were allowed the time to look through their answers. Then, they received a worksheet (Appendix B), which instructed them to list out trends observed in their survey answers. The goal of this was to have students individually reflect, evaluate, and become more aware of how they may (or may not) have changed, and possible reasons for their results. The third step to the activity involved partner and group discussion. First, students were given five minutes to share their individual evaluations and reflections with a classmate. Students were encouraged to ask

each other questions using target discussion skills they had learned, such as, “Why do you think so?” (asking for a reason), “Can you give me an example?” (asking for an example), and “How do you know about that?” (asking for information). I occasionally intervened to prompt students on how to reflect when they seemed to be confused with the task. Lastly, students were grouped with two or three other classmates, and were instructed to have a ten-minute group discussion based on two discussion questions (see Appendix C). During the pair and group discussions, I monitored from a distance, taking notes on student interactions and remarks. These notes were used to complement the data collected from the students.

DISCUSSION

Observations Made in Class

In the first step of the activity, there were obvious differences amongst students in the amount of writing in the free response. Whereas some students wrote elaborate responses, others wrote answers that had nothing to do with reflection, such as, “Thank you for teaching me.” Unsurprisingly, students who seemed to be less motivated wrote short or no response. On the other hand, students who seemed to be active and committed to the class wrote longer responses, which included a reflection of how they had been feeling or performing in class. For instance, some students ($n = 28$) reflected on why they felt EDC was enjoyable. They mentioned the unique opinions their peers shared, or how the challenge of trying to understand others enabled them to broaden their perspectives. Other common responses had to do with students’ concern about their lack of vocabulary ($n = 29$) or experience to have effective discussions in English ($n = 5$).

Initially, the second step of the activity was included to allow students to individually reflect without having to rush into conclusion about their learning process over the previous 14 weeks. Fortunately, while doing the activity, I observed how this step also provided a safe place for students to reflect, evaluate, and summarize their experience without having to feel anxious or frustrated about sharing it with their peers in English immediately. Moreover, it allowed me to answer questions individually, or provide more guidance as to how to compare their survey answers. For example, I asked questions, such as, “Why do you think you cared more about making mistakes in the beginning of the course?” One difficulty that was observed in almost all of the classes was translating parts of the survey questions from Japanese to English when noting their observations on the worksheet. Even though survey questions were translated into Japanese for students to answer without having to stress about understanding the question items “correctly”, it seemed to have created more confusion when students were asked to prepare to discuss their reflections in English. Following this confusion in one of the first classes I taught for the final lesson, I added example items under the brainstorming map to alleviate any stress or confusion of translating items during reflection (Appendix B).

The third step of the activity was when I observed significant differences in how students reflected, shared their evaluations, and responded to each other. This also impacted the degree of success of the activity. The following section will describe differences and observations made between two different classes.

Rapport and the Openness to Share

As Rogers (2011) points out, the starting point for the process of reflection can be negative because it can be “challenging, uncomfortable, or perplexing” (p. 50). Indeed, during the pair and group discussions, many students repeatedly mentioned *muzukashii*, which means “difficult” or “challenging” in Japanese. However, how these students reacted after acknowledging that the activity was challenging was different. One group, a Saturday class, reacted positively to my

encouragement to continue discussing, whereas one of the Friday classes struggled to continue the discussion after my encouragement.

The Friday class was a low-intermediate class consisting of three girls and five boys. Students generally got along well together as they often joked and were friendly to each other. The students showed respect to me, but the interactions were no more than what would typically be expected within and during class. Throughout my observation over the semester, this class appeared to have a lower motivation than the Saturday class. Punctuality was poor; most classes started with only three to four students, and other students would trickle in as the class continued. During the third step of the reflection activity, I observed students discussing the changes or similarities they saw, but their answers were short and lacking in detail. For instance, one student mentioned, “I couldn’t understand the teacher’s English in the beginning, but I understood her more at the end.” Although this is a good start to a reflective process, there was no elaboration made following this statement. In addition, even after being encouraged by me, none of the students asked follow-up questions to prompt their peer to share more. Interestingly, it seemed as though this group of students were using more negative emotion words, such as *worried*, *nervous*, *hate*, *uncomfortable*, *no motivation*, and *bad*. When asked to elaborate, all of the students responded with “I don’t know.”

The Saturday class was also a low-intermediate class consisting of six girls and two boys. Students were very friendly with each other; they would always leave the classroom as a group after class was done, and often talked about where to go for lunch after class. The teacher-student rapport was also friendly, and small talk was made every week after class. Students stayed after the end of class to show pictures to each other or the teacher to share what they had done throughout the week. Students in this class had slightly higher motivation than the Friday group, but it was not a significant difference. During the third step of the reflection activity, they also discussed the changes or similarities they saw in their survey answers. Unlike the Friday group, students in this class challenged each other to dig deeper into why they felt certain ways, and how these changes or similarities were affecting their learning in class as illustrated below. Pseudonyms are used hereafter to maintain their anonymity, and Japanese utterances have been italicized.

Saki: First, I felt very stressed... I think I was nervous.

Ako: *Heeeee* [I see]. Why stressed?

Saki: [pause] I think saying opinion in English was stress... I don’t have enough vocabulary, so I can’t say what I want. Do you understand?

Ako: Yes, yes. Thank you!

Ami: Oh, can I ask a question?

Saki: Sure.

Ami: How about now? Still stress?

Saki: No, I don’t feel stress! I don’t feel nervous saying my opinion in English now.

Ami: [laughing] Good, good! Why different?

Saki: Ummm, I think everyone is friendly in class. Everyone helps me. Umm... *gakka tte nante iundakke* [how do you say “gakka” in English]?

Shin: Ahhh, “major”?

Saki: Yes! Everyone is different major, but so friendly and helpful. I know I can ask for help. What do you think of my idea?

Ami: *Yokattane* [That’s great]! As you said, everyone is friendly and helpful. I also felt scared in the beginning, but practicing every week with everyone was good. Lots of support! Support is important in discussion! Thank you for support!

The discussion above not only shows how students challenged each other to share individual evaluations and emotions, but also support each other when opinions were shared. More importantly, it shows students' openness, willingness, and engagement to share their experience with others. It is important to point out that students challenged each other even more when prompted by the teacher to ask questions. As Rogers (2011) suggests, better teacher-student rapport can allow the teacher to prompt and facilitate reflection without provoking negative feelings. Similarly, Frisby and Martin (2010) reports how interpersonal relationships between the teacher and students can positively affect student engagement and learning. Comparing the two classes, teacher-student rapport may have had an effect on their reflection process to some extent.

Friendly Atmosphere in Class

All nine classes that I implemented the activity with shared a common experience or answer during the third step of the activity: a friendly atmosphere and relationship made the discussion more enjoyable.

During the ten-minute discussion, similar answers were shared for the first question, which was, "What changed/did not change in your survey answers?" Many shared that supportive classmates reduced the pressure they initially felt to discuss, and the micro-size class allowed them to get to know each other.

The second question was included to encourage students to reflect on their experience so that they could think about how they would learn differently or similarly in a similar situation in the future: "What should next year's freshmen do to be successful in the English Discussion Class?" Surprisingly, all nine classes had the same suggestion for this – make friends in class. Common reasons for this advice seemed to be related to many of their experiences of discussing in class. For instance, one student mentioned that sharing their personal opinion was less intimidating when they knew they were talking to a friend. Another student shared that even though the topics of discussion were more difficult towards the end of the course, it was "easier" to discuss because she felt that she was accepted by her group of classmates. Surely, as Frisby and Martin (2010) acknowledge, student-student rapport is influential in encouraging classroom participation. Classes with stronger and friendlier student-student rapport usually had fewer discussions that stalled, and were able to take control by building a friendly and supportive atmosphere. None of the reflections made by students included how the teacher positively or negatively affected their learning. As Suzuki (2018) supports, since the nature of EDC lessons require students to be proactive members, the biggest contributor to learning in EDC is for empowered students to take control of their own learning and atmosphere building with peers.

VARIATIONS

Although the survey portion was conducted in Japanese, it can easily be adapted with an English version survey. As was mentioned in the discussion section, many students showed confusion when they were prompted to share their survey results in English when the survey items were in Japanese. Having the question items in English and Japanese may reduce the confusion in steps two and three. In addition to adapting the language of the survey, the questions can also be selected and customized depending on what the teacher feels students need to focus on, for instance, question items on motivation, anxiety, autonomous learning, or investment in learning.

Another suggestion for variation is changing how the process of reflection is included in different steps throughout the activity. The core reflective process for the activity I implemented was mainly included in the third step, when students were challenged to discuss with their peers.

While students had the opportunity to reflect on their learning experience for the entire semester, I also observed students showing hesitation towards the concept of reflecting. Given that

students had three times to answer survey questions and “reflect”, I had presupposed that students would be able to connect the dots of all three surveys and engage in reflection without much confusion. However, as Ertmer and Newby (1996) argue, “students do not develop learning strategies unless they receive explicit instruction in their use” (p. 19). Reflective practice may be the same in the sense that we cannot presuppose students to “reflect” without explicit instructions. Moreover, according to Walters, Seidel, and Gardner (as cited in Ertmer & Newby, 1996), if teachers want to promote reflection, they must make sure to allocate enough time to guide students to create a habit so that students are comfortable and understand the benefits of the process. Taking this into account, to develop students to appreciate genuine reflection, more consistent reflective activities throughout the semester may raise more awareness amongst the students. Furthermore, through extensive reflective practice, student may grow to be expert learners and engage more in their own learning.

CONCLUSION

This study offers support that reflective practice can encourage students to become expert learners as they engage in their own learning. Different reactions from students towards the activity also suggest the importance of the teacher’s careful planning in the preparation phase for students to reap the benefits of reflection to become expert learners. Since this was a pilot activity conducted over one semester, examining the benefits of consistent reflection could be pursued in further studies. Despite my intentions, the limitations to this activity was that students were not able to build a clear habit of reflecting on their learning process and strategies. Perhaps building a habit and becoming more comfortable with the reflective process will most likely support students to becoming more autonomous expert learners.

Going forward, in addition to the above, there may be potential to investigate how student-student and teacher-student rapport can positively or negatively affect the reflective process. As the discussion suggests, student-student or teacher-student rapport may have had an effect on *how* and *how much* students invested into sharing their reflective process was different. In such a micro-class as EDC, rapport and relationships in class are more critical elements to creating a supportive and flexible environment than we may think.

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APPENDIX A – Survey (Step One)

Name: _____

English Discussion Class: Fall 2018

Reflect on how you feel or do in **regular** classes. Circle your answer.

普段の（テスト日以外）英語ディスカッションの授業を振り返ってどう感じますか？

	とても 当てはま る	やや 当てはまる	あまり 当てはまら ない	全く 当てはま らない
1. フレーズを使うことができた				
2. 自分の意見を英語で伝えることができた				
3. 他の意見を英語で理解する事ができた				
4. トピックについて考えさせられた				
5. 英語のディスカッションで間違えても気にしない				
6. 他の学生の前で英語を話す と緊張する				
7. 先生の言っていることがわ からない				
8. 授業中に英語で話す事がプ レッシャーだ				
9. 英語で話せるようになるこ とは、将来にもつながると思う				
10. 英語を勉強することで、視 野が広がると思う				

ディスカッションで一番大事なのは、_____だ。

振り返って思うこと、感じることを自由に書いて下さい。（必須）

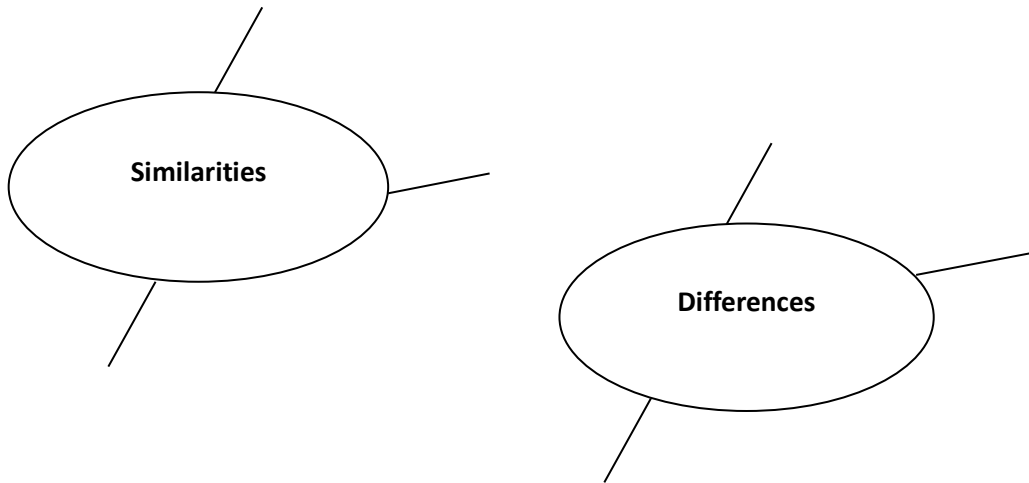
* 回答は授業評価には影響しません。思ったこと、感じたことを正直に書いて下さい*

APPENDIX B – Worksheet Handout (Step Two)

Reflection Activity

Congratulations! This is your last class for fall semester 😊

1. Take a look at your answers to the surveys you answered this semester. What are some similarities you see in your survey answers? What are some differences you see in your survey answers?



Examples: confidence in using phrases, motivation, stress, understanding other classmates etc.

Discuss your answers with a partner.

- How is it different/similar?
- Why do you think your answers changed/did not change?

APPENDIX C – Group Discussion Questions (Step Three)

Practice Group Discussion

1. What changed/did not change in your survey answers?
2. What should next year's freshmen do to be successful in the English Discussion Class?