Self-reflections for Growth: Developing Self-regulated Learners in Discussion Class

Sayaka Morita

ABSTRACT

Self-regulated learners can take control of and evaluate one's own learning and behavior. They are reflective learners who continuously try to become better, making them ideal learners. In highly student-centered learning environments such as the English discussion classes at Rikkyo university, how well students can think about their own learning, set goals, make plans, and motivate themselves could have an impact on their success in the class. To encourage and foster reflective learning, 88 students of various English levels and departments participated in an activity where they recorded their growth and learning experiences through a reflective writing activity. Overall, the activity seemed to have a positive effect on student performance.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will present an activity I designed and conducted in 11 English discussion classes at Rikkyo University. In the spring semester of 2019, I carried out an activity where students wrote a self-reflection at the end of class. The activity was built on Dörnyei's (2009) personal significance principle and Zimmerman's (2000) Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) Model. The aim of the activity was to give opportunities for students to practice self-regulated learning (SRL) by having students think and write about what they had learned, thought, or felt in class. By doing so, I had hoped that the activity would help students internalize their learning experiences and help increase and sustain motivation. Overall, the activity seemed to have a positive effect on student performance as many students expressed in their final reflective entries that they were able to see their growth throughout the semester.

DISCUSSION

The English discussion classes, run by the Center for English Discussion Class (EDC), has a highly unified curriculum where all instructors teach the same context, use the same textbook, use the same mode of assessment, and undergo thorough training and faculty development every semester to ensure that all students are given the same quality of instruction. The main learning goals and outcomes of the EDC are for students to become proficient users of what are referred to as Discussion Skills and Communication Skills in the EDC and to improve English speaking fluency. Every week, students are introduced to a Discussion Skill and are given ample opportunities for practice of the target skills through pair work and group discussions. Some examples of Discussion Skills that were taught in Spring 2019 are *opinions, supporting opinions (reasons and examples), joining a discussion, changing topics, possibilities,* and *definitions*. In addition to Discussion Skills, students are required to practice Communication Skills, which are functions that help students become active listeners and negotiators of meaning. Although discussion classes are divided into four levels according to students' TOEIC scores, all students are expected to use the Discussion Skills and Communication Skills while discussing various topics, regardless of their level of English.

What makes the EDC unique is its small class-size: there is an average of 8 students in each class, with the minimum being 7 and maximum being 9. In addition to the small class size, the course, based on Communicative Language Teaching principles, is highly student-centered with an average of 60-70 minutes of student-to-student interaction in a 100-minute class. Some of the biggest and most persistent student challenges that are visible across all levels and departments

are foreign language anxiety, low confidence and motivation, and lack of English vocabulary. The main purposes of the activity were to see whether writing reflections could help students deal with such challenges and whether it could help students become more reflective of their own learning and help sustain and increase student motivation. Simply put, the goal of the activity was to help students become more self-regulated learners.

The key principle underlying the activity is one of the main principles of Dörnyei's principled communicative approach (PCA): *the personal significance principle*, which states that "PCA should be meaning-focused and personally significant as a whole" (p. 41, Dörnyei, 2009). In support of the key principle, I chose to focus on Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) and its models, specifically Zimmerman's (2000) Cyclical Phases Model, as a foundation for the activity.

According to Pintrich (1999), SRL is defined as "the strategies that students use to regulate their cognition (i.e., use of various cognitive and metacognitive strategies) as well as the use of resource management strategies that students use to control their learning" (p. 1). Zimmerman (2001) states that self-regulated learners are not only self-directed metacognitively but are also self-motivated. Self-regulated learners proactively seek out and profit from learning activities. In the context of discussion class, self-regulated learners look for ways to become better discussants by taking control of and evaluating one's own learning and behavior by thinking about one's thinking; planning, monitoring, and evaluating personal growth against a standard; and sustaining and increasing motivation.

While there are various SRL models, I have focused on Zimmerman's Cyclical Phases Model as it seemed the most applicable to this context. The Cyclical Phases Model is organized into three phases: forethought, performance, and self-reflection. In the forethought phase, the students analyze the task, set goals, and plan how to reach them. The students' motivational beliefs also play a role in energizing the process and influencing the activation of learning strategies. In the performance phase, students execute the task while monitoring their progress, and they use a number of self-control strategies to keep themselves cognitively engaged and motivated to finish the task. Finally, in the self-reflection phase, students assess the performance of the task and make attributions about their success or failure (Panadero, 2017). The activity I conducted is a combination of the forethought and self-reflection phase. Although simple in design, the reflective activity is similar to a learning diary and gives students some freedom with regards to what to reflect on. In addition to the flexibility and freedom journal writing provides for the students, significant research by Schmitz also shows that the use of learning diaries enhances all SRL phases and has an effect on students' SRL (Panadero, 2017).

Figure 1.
Current version Cyclical phases model. Adapted from Zimmerman and Moylan (2009).
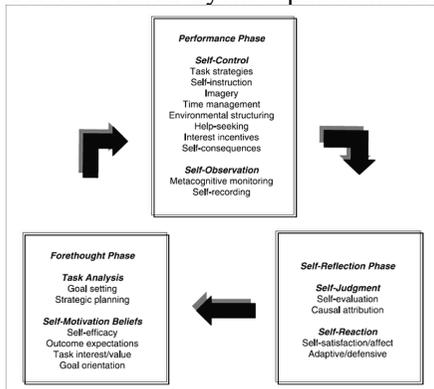
PROCEDURE

Given its simplicity and flexibility, the activity could have been carried out in any lesson, but in this context it was conducted only in lessons 4, 8, 12, and 14. At the EDC, lessons 4, 8, 12 are review lessons where the students review previously learned Discussion Skills and Communication Skills through extended practice. Since the Discussion Tests are held after the review lessons, in lessons 5, 9, and 13, the review lessons also serve to help students prepare for the upcoming test, which makes them ideal for self-reflection. Another reason for conducting the activity in the review lessons was due to the flexibility and time that teachers have in review lessons compared to regular lessons. A final reflective activity was implemented in lesson 14, the last lesson of the semester. Eleven classes were selected randomly, and the activity was conducted four times in each class group. In total, the activity was carried out 44 times throughout the 14-week semester.

At the end of class, students were given a reflection sheet (see Appendix) and spent about 5 minutes writing, in English or Japanese, responses to one or more of the guiding questions that are listed on the reflection sheet:

Guiding Questions for Reflections 1, 2, 3 (Lessons 4, 8, 12) – Appendix A
- What did you learn?
- Were the Discussion Skills and/or Communication Skills difficult to use?
- Did your opinions change after the discussion?
- What are your goals for the Discussion Test?
- Is there anything you would like the teacher to know?

Guiding Questions for Reflection 4 (Lesson 14) – Appendix B
- Please talk about your growth in Discussion class.
- What is your goal for next semester?
- Any questions or comments for the teacher?

Since the activity itself is fairly simple and straightforward, the students do not need much scaffolding. However, the first time the activity was conducted I had to repeatedly remind students that they did not have to respond to all of the guiding questions. Students also needed reminders that the reflection should be about the class and the students themselves, and not about the course in general or the mode of instruction. Since the only material required is the reflection sheet, instructors do not have to spend much time preparing. However, if instructors decide to comment on students' reflections as I did in a few of my classes, depending on how many students there are, it could be time-consuming. It is also important for teachers to prepare prompts or guiding questions that could help steer students in the right direction.

VARIATIONS

One of the benefits of this activity is that it is highly adaptable. Instructors could modify the guiding questions or prompts to suit their needs. For higher level students, the guiding questions could be taken out and replaced with a topic or simple prompt such as "Write about today's class" to give students more freedom and autonomy in what they choose to write, or conversely, instructors could provide guiding questions or prompts that are more challenging. It could be interesting to see what students write when asked to free write. Additionally, although the activity was not carried out in every lesson, the activity could be conducted at any point in the semester.

DATA ANALYSIS

In total, 270 reflection entries were written by students. Out of 270, there were 54 Reflection 1 entries, 82 Reflection 2 entries, 62 Reflection 3 entries, and 72 Reflection 4 entries. The activity was conducted in 11 different classes with a total of 88 participating students. Out of 86 students, two students were from China and two were of Korean descent. Students resided in various departments: economics, business, sociology, science, law and politics, global liberal arts, contemporary psychology, and humanities (history, letters, and education). The levels of the students varied, with eight students from a level 1 class (TOEIC score 680 and above), 39 students from a level 2 class (TOEIC score 480-679), and 39 students from a level 3 class (TOEIC score 280-479).

Students were given the choice to write their reflections in either English or Japanese so that their English writing ability did not prevent them from expressing themselves fully or negatively impact their self-reflective process. Table 1 shows the number of entries written in English by reflection type. Overall, the numbers indicate that half of the total entries were written in English, and the percentage remained fairly consistent throughout all four reflection types.

Table 1. Number of entries written in English by reflection type

Reflection type	n	%
Reflection 1[a]	28	52
Reflection 2[b]	42.5	52
Reflection 3[c]	30.5	49
Reflection 4[d]	35	49
Total ($n = 270$)	136	50

Note. Entries where both English and Japanese were used were counted as 0.5 for each language. [a]n = 54. [b]n = 82. [c]n = 62. [d]n = 72.

The number of entries written in English varied according to class level. Table 2 shows the number of entries written in English by class level. Motivated students and students in higher-level classes (levels 1 and 2) tended to write in English more compared to students in lower levels (level 3). Indeed, 87% of total entries were written in English by level 1 students; 61% were written by level 2 students; and only a third of level 3 students used English to write their reflections. Although most students generally used the same language to write all of their entries, some students used both languages. Reflections written in Japanese tended to be longer, more analytical, and deeper in content than those written in English. This may justify the use of the students' L1 when having them take part in self-reflective activities, particularly for students with lower levels of English.

Table 2. Number of entries written in English by class level

Class level	*n*	%
Level 1[a]	20	87
Level 2[b]	74	61
Level 3[c]	42	33
Total (*n* = 270)	136	50

[a]n = 23. [b]n = 121. [c]n = 126.

In terms of content, generally, students responded to at least one of the guiding questions. Most students wrote about what they had learned, the difficulties they were having, their English-related goals for the future (not only pertaining to the Discussion Test but in general), and many students reflected on their changes and growth. Some students also wrote about the topics discussed in class, their ideas and whether their opinions changed after discussions, and a few students asked the instructor questions or gave comments. In terms of length, students on average wrote about 3 sentences.

Before conducting this activity, I suspected that most students would not write very much since they knew the reflections would not affect their grade. Therefore, I was pleasantly surprised to see that many students tried to spend more than the allotted time to write their reflections and put in substantial effort. The next section provides examples of entries written by students who showed signs of becoming self-regulated learners by practicing self-regulated learning strategies.

Student Case 1

In her first reflection, Mina (pseudonym), a level 3 student majoring in law, expresses her realization of her lack of English fluency compared with her peers. As a way to motivate herself, she encourages herself to improve and try her best in every class:

> I don't know it is answer but my classmates are so good at speaking English that this class is little difficult for me. I rearized [sic] I can't speak English fruently [sic] at firt [sic] time class. I respect my classmates because they can do what I can't do. But don't worry, I want to improve my English skills so I never giving up! I'll try doing my best in every class.

While Mina expressed worry about her English speaking skills and encouraged herself to do better in her first entry, in her second reflection, she expands on her previous entry by stating that she has more confidence, but she also knows that she needs to improve her word choice (vocabulary) and discuss more deeply about topics:

> Last time, though I wrote that I didn't have confidence of my English, now I have confidence of using English. It's because I learn [sic] how to discuss in this class, and I don't want to pull my classmates legs. But I know I often use incorrect word, so I want to improve that. Also I want to discuss issues more deeply. So, I should think more deeply about topics, or see topics from defferent [sic] perspective. But it's defficult [sic] for me.

In her third reflection, Mina writes more in-depth about her feelings about thinking deeply and logically. An attempt to protect her self-esteem can be seen by her justifying why she could not come up with strong reasons to support her ideas—in this case, sleep deprivation:

> As I take this discussion class, I feel I have to think more deeply or logicaly [sic]. Sometimes, I choose one without reasons or just because it's a normal thing. But if I want to tell my opinions to everyone more clearly, I must have strong reasons. I think why I choose one without reasons is that I am seelpy [sic] or my brain is not working well yet. So, I try to keep early hours.

In her final reflection, Mina talks about her growth throughout the semester and her future goals for improving her English skills. She ends with a word of appreciation for the teacher:

> In april, I didn't know how to discussion. So, I just said my opinion or agreed and disagreed to other people's opinions. But the more I learned discussion skill like giving reason or example, checking understanding, the more exciting discussion became. I think that the discussion we are doing is very interacting one and active. So, I can enjoy it, and I feel I growed [sic] up. In next semester, I want to tell others my opinion more correctly. So, during the summer I studied English I guess or if I have enough time. I'm happy to meet you Ms. Sayaka and take your class. I want to take your class next semester! Thank you a lot!!

In her final entry, Mina reflects on what she learned in class, such as thinking more deeply about topics and giving stronger reasons to support her opinions. She has developed an awareness of her shortcomings, and she tries to encourage and motivate herself to do better in the future. We can also see that she focuses on the inner changes she has experienced; we can see her positive attitude and excitement toward having discussions in the future as well as future goals she has set for herself.

Student Case 2
Like Mina, some students were very open about their struggles in class. From early on in the semester, discussion class seemed challenging for Karina (pseudonym), a level 2 student majoring in literature. Initially, I was worried about her lack of output and overuse of Japanese in class, but I could only speculate what was going on. The reflections she wrote proved to be helpful for me in understanding her better: Karina was struggling with low confidence and foreign language anxiety:

> 日本語でやる討論と求められることが同じで最初は周りに比べて全くしゃべれい、言葉が出てこない自分が情けなくて劣等感で泣きそうになったことが何度かある程難しく感じたが、とにかくまちがえても話してみようと、日常生活の中で頭の中の使用言語を英語に切り替えて見たら、スラスラ出てくるようになった。多分、緊張していたから出てこなかったんだと思ったので、あんまり顔を見られても意識しないように努めたら、前より自信持ってつたないながらも発言できるようになって、成長を実感した。文法ミスがあってもまぁかまわないやとわりきることも大事だとわかった。あとはリスニング能力を高めて、かんたんなやりとりくらいはできるようになりたい [We are expected to carry out our discussions in the same way we would in Japanese, so initially, I was unable to participate

as much as the other students. I often felt ashamed of my inability to come up with words and found myself on the verge of tears because of my lack of confidence. But once I decided to speak up regardless of making mistakes and started practicing daily by thinking in English, I became better at speaking fluently. I probably had a hard time speaking because I was nervous, but when I started making an effort to not feel self-conscious even when I was at the center of attention, I became more confident, and I was able to share my opinions even with my poor English, and I could feel my growth. I also realized that it is important to think, "oh well," even if I make grammatical errors. Now, I want to improve my listening skills and to at least be able to engage in basic conversation].[2]

In her second reflection, we can see that Karina's sense of growth and improvement has gotten stronger, particularly in terms of fluency. We can also see her willingness to communicate and motivation for participating in discussions. Correspondingly, she is able to reflect on her use of the Discussion Skills, which she deems as being her weakness. By making connections of the Discussion Skills to the Discussion Test, she shows an understanding of what is expected on the test and what she needs to do in order to perform well on the test.

> だんだん、スラスラ話そうとする努力が苦でなくなってきた。簡単な単語を適当に組み立てるとそれなりの文になる程度にディスカッションスキルを磨けて、成長を実感している。普段考えていることを言う機会がないから、それがディスカッションへの意欲につながっているのかもしれない。しかし、成績をあげるためにはそれだけではなくて決められた"スキル"を使いこなさないといけない。来週のテストではまさに、そうした"Skill"をいかに使いこなせるかが試されているのだから、言いたいことを言うだけにとどまらず、ある程度"授業"を意識して参加したい [Gradually, it's getting easier to try and speak more fluently. I have polished my discussion skills to the point where I can casually string basic words together into a coherent sentence, and I can notice my improvement. I usually don't have opportunities to share my thoughts, which may be the reason why I feel motivated in discussions. However, I also have to master the designated "skill" in order to raise my grade. How well we can use the "skill" is exactly what we'll be tested on in our test next week, so I hope to participate with the awareness that it is a "lesson," and not just stop at saying what I want to say].

In her final entry, which is not shown here, Karina repeats what she wrote in her previous entries about not feeling scared to speak in English anymore and how she will continue to build her confidence next semester. She ends with words of appreciation for the teacher and writes about what she liked about the teacher. Finally, she ends with an apology for using a lot of Japanese in class.

Final reflections

While some students showed signs of growth and improvement in each reflective entry, for other students, their growth was more apparent in their final reflection. Perhaps this was due to the fact that for the final entry, I specifically asked students to write about the growth they felt throughout the semester. Many students showed signs of motivation to become better at English, as

---

[2] Entries written in Japanese were translated into English by the author.

exemplified in the three examples below. The following entries were written by three different students in their last lesson:

> When I attended to the very first class of discussion, I felt that I have to improve my skills. Then I started to use podcasts, BBC News or Radio, using skills carefully. I think these materials helped me and I grew up a little bit in this class. In next semester, I'd like to use more skills as possible as I can, and speak fluently, I had a good time to speak in English because I usually cannot speak English in my house that my family can't understand, and had fun. It was good for me to improve and communicate in English.
> – *Level 1 student, history major*

> I was able to learn some discussion skills from this class. I found myself using these skills outside of this class as well and I felt the discussion moved smoothly by using the skills. Before I take this class, I didn't like to have discussion with people, but I learned how to state opinion and ask questions to others and how to organize the discussion and the practice make the confidence to speak and give my opinion in the class. So, I think I'm okay to have discussion with others. Thank you for having me in this class!! I learned a lot, and I enjoyed this class very much :) – *Level 1 student, global liberal arts major*

> The biggest growth is skill of expression [sic] my opinion in English. And, listen and ask others. So, I used to communicate in English. Besides, I got discussion ability such as giving reason and example, talk about possibilities and more. It's useful for Japanese discussion too. I want to get more vocabulary, because I can't express what I want to say exactly. And, I want to do paraphrase. That's skill is important for discussion. This class is very good and fun for me. We can improve English and discussion skill. I feel this class was one of the best class in Spring Semester. Thank you!! – *Level 2 student, business major*

As is expressed in the final entries, overall, students expressed a sense of growth and improvement of their English discussion and communication skills. Many students also wrote about their future goals and plans on how to achieve them. Some students also wrote about the benefits of the Discussion Skills that they learned and talked about the class activities that were helpful for them.

CONCLUSION
Although I cannot say that this activity helped all participating students become more self-regulated learners and helped increase student motivation, for the majority of the students, having the chance to write down their thoughts seemed beneficial in the sense that it gave students a chance to practice self-reflection and writing about their learning experiences.

This activity is not only beneficial for students but teachers as well. The activity helped me realize that by reflecting on their own learning, students can gain more out of the class than speaking skills. Students can develop an awareness of their own learning process, analyze their weaknesses and strengths, and set goals for the future. Reflections also give room for student to teacher interaction as students get the opportunity to ask questions to the teacher, and teachers are given the opportunity to understand their students a little better.

The limitation I had with the activity was the lack of time and resources to carry out a thorough analysis of all collected data. In the future, a more careful and larger analysis of the data collected as well as a survey asking students to rate how useful and meaningful the activity was for self-reflection and increasing motivation would help assess the effectiveness of this activity.

REFERENCES

Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Dörnyei, Z. (2003). Attitudes, orientations, and motivations in language learning: Advances in theory, research, and applications. *Language learning*, *53*(S1), 3-32.

Dörnyei, Z. (2009). The 2010s. Communicative Language Teaching in the 21st Century: The "Principled Communicative Approach". *Perspectives*, *36*(2), 33-43.

Panadero, E. (2017). A review of self-regulated learning: Six models and four directions for research. *Frontiers in psychology*, *8*, 422.

Pintrich, P. R. (1999). The role of motivation in promoting and sustaining self-regulated learning. *International journal of educational research*, *31*(6), 459-470.

Zimmerman, B. J., & Moylan, A. R. (2009). Self-regulation: Where metacognition and motivation intersect. In *Handbook of metacognition in education* (pp. 311-328). Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.

Zimmerman, B. J., & Schunk, D. H. (Eds.). (2001). *Self-regulated learning and academic achievement: Theoretical perspectives*. Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.

APPENDIX A – Reflections 1~3

NAME   DATE

DISCUSSION REFLECTION

Please **write about today's class** by answering **one or more** the questions below. You have 3~4 minutes to write. You may write in English or Japanese.

Questions (please select one or more questions):
What did you learn? Were the Discussion and/or Communication Skills difficult to use? Did you opinions change after the discussion? What are your goals for the Discussion Test? Is there anything you would like the teacher to know?

APPENDIX B – Reflection 4

NAME   DATE

DISCUSSION REFLECTION

LESSON 14

Please **write about the semester** by answering the questions below.
You have 3~4 minutes to write. You may write in English or Japanese.

Questions:
- Please talk about your growth (成長) in Discussion class.
- What is your goal for next semester?
- Any questions or comments for the teacher?