

The Effects of Reconstructing Reflection Journals According to Students' Recommendations

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Abstract

In a fall 2020 study to gather data from first-year university students about the instructor's preliminary implementation of reflection journals, their feedback shaped the instructor's secondary and tertiary implementations of the activity in the proceeding two semesters. In the process of examining and re-examining what students voiced on numerous occasions in preparation for publications and presentations, the instructor reflected on and scrutinized her teaching practices, while also tailoring the activity according to students' needs. These needs were extending the due date of the activity, sharing the activity's goals with the learners, including a prompt for general comments, and allowing for students to review the previous lesson's journal at the start of class as well as share their journals with other classmates. In the sharing of data consisting of the student voices, with peers in professional development settings, the instructor was required to assess how she teaches and responds to learner feedback. This process also aided the instructor with the aim to listen to learners' voices more actively to guide teaching practice.

Keywords: journal writing, reflection, reflective teaching, student feedback, student voices

Introduction

In fall 2020, a research study was administered to gather data about the opinions and feedback from first-year university students regarding reflection journals. As this was the preliminary implementation of reflection journals for the instructor, it was vital to learn more about the students' perceptions of the activity. As student opinions were the focus of a previous article (Arthurson, 2021) this article is based on the data and a further exploration of students' feedback and advice on the journals. A comparison of the original journal format as well as the revised journals implemented in both spring and fall 2021 semesters will be shared as a potential source for other educators in EFL who may be interested in using this activity with their students. Ways the student voices guided the second and third implementation of the activity will be presented. In addition, the instructor reflections of what was gleaned from the first, second, and third implementations of the activity will be explored.

Literature Review

Reflection is a process necessary for both students and teachers to develop their skills in educational settings (Hussein, Al Jamal, & Sadi, 2020, p. 3486). According to Gupta, Mishra, and Shree (2019): "Reflective practice can be seen as both a structure to support critical thinking and enhance existing understanding and a method for facilitating independent and in-depth learning through inquiry" (p. 41). For instructors, it may manifest in taking time to examine their practice, thereby discovering new ways to improve their lessons (Gupta et al, 2019, pp. 39-40). One form of reflection can be in performing research about their practice to improve their teaching proficiency (Al-Baiz, 2012, p. 325). In a study by Rahimi and Weisi about EFL teachers and the effect of research on their practice, participating in research positively contributed to these teachers' professional

development; through sharing research, it allowed for new connections with other educators allowing for a deeper knowledge about English language teaching (2018, p. 9).

Student voices need to be incorporated into educational practice and policy. Many educators dedicated to improving their practice may seek out feedback from their learners. Bloemert, Paran and Jansen state “excluding the voice of students from research leads to an incomplete picture of the educational system” (2020, p. 429). It is vital that once feedback from students is collected, it needs to be examined with time and care (EPFL, n.d., para 4). Once this feedback has been thoughtfully processed by the teacher, it needs to be responded to (Paige, 2017, para. 2). Borg (2010, as cited by Rahimi & Weis, 2018, p. 2), states that teachers who conduct classroom-based research not only ameliorate their own individual practice, but may influence systematic improvement. Teachers who actively engage in reflective practice may find feedback from their learners as a beneficial process for reflection on and improvement of their teaching.

Educators involved in reflection may also want to create opportunities for their students to practice reflection. Reflection journals can aid in this development. Reflection journals are tools for students to not only improve their writing skills but may also be used for processing the lesson content, performing self-assessment and, goal setting. Writing reflection journals can allow for learners to reflect on a past event and share about how they might respond to such another recurrence of that event (Hashemia & Mirzaeib, 2015, p. 104). There are two recent studies about reflection journals in EFL classes at Japanese universities. In *Self-regulated Learning Processes Outside the Classroom: Insights from a Case Study of Japanese EFL Students*, Yabukoshi (2020) has the learners journals about their goals for TOEIC tests. With *Developing Self-Regulated Learners in Discussion Class* by Morita (2020), students not only write about the lesson’s activities but their emotions and thoughts in that lesson. Nonetheless, research related to student voices shaping the structure of reflective activities in Japanese EFL settings appears to be quite limited.

Objective

With a shift from in-person to online classes, reflection journals were also a tool to create and maintain student-teacher interactions in a new setting with unique challenges, wherein all members were learning to navigate. As a result of what seemed to be a scarcity in research done about reflection journals in Japanese EFL settings and this instructor’s inexperience with the activity, data was collected from students to learn more about their opinions about the activity, and for future adaptations to make it more meaningful for learners. Students were required to do the activity in the fall 2020 semester, examining the student voices through the research project shaped the second and third implementation of the activity and assisted the instructor in her teaching practice.

Setting and Participants

The setting was at a liberal arts university in Tokyo with first-year students from two mandatory writing classes and two mandatory debate classes. The lessons were once a week for 100 minutes. Students were required to submit reflection journals by 23:59 of each lesson for week 2 to week 13 of the fall 2020 semester. The journals were submitted through a learning platform. The students had lower to higher intermediate English proficiency with TOEIC scores varying from 280 to 699. All had the ability to write their journals in English; they were given a list of prompts and a template. The final reflection journal in week 13 was used to gather data about their opinions, experience and advice

about the activity. Though all students needed to submit the final journal for class participation points, 55 students or approximately 75% of the total taught, gave their consent that data from their journals be used in the study. The final journal used as an instrument for data collection contained nine prompts related to the following areas: a) writing journals in relation to improving English skills, b) previous experiences with journals, c) if the current experience was positive or negative, d) if the activity helped with remembering the class, e) goal writing and goal-achievement, f) interest in repeating the activity, and g) advice about the activity. In a latter section, data about their advice will be examined, in addition to how it shaped the second and third implementation.

Preliminary Implementation

The first implementation occurred in the fall semester of 2020, the second semester of online learning. Guided by the literature, the journals had the main prompts which remained unchanged from lesson 2 to 13, focusing on processing the content through reflecting, self-evaluation, and goal setting. According to Bray and Harsch (1996) “limiting the number of items, the teacher is more likely to get quality reflection from students” (para. 29). In addition, the journals also implemented report formatting guidelines including a word count. As all learners were in a mandatory writing class, even if it was not being taught by the instructor, those guidelines were required and it was a practical way to develop students’ proficiency with report writing. Appendix A is the lesson 3 journal activity for the writing class.

Before the final lesson’s journal, which was the tool to gather data, for the instructor reading the lesson 2 to 12 journals provided direct and indirect feedback about the activity. For the writing class, it soon became evident that in comparison to the debate class, more meaningful topics and more prompts related to the textbook topics needed to be explicitly added to give the students in the writing class more meaningful content to write about. Please see Table 1 for the change in prompts. The debate class prompts remained more or less the same as can be seen in Table 2.

Table 1
Writing Class Prompts for Lessons 2 and 8 in Fall 2020

Lesson 2	Lesson 8
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Summarize the main points learned in class. 2. Information you already knew before class and when you learned about it. 3. Information that you just learned about in the class. 4. Surprising or interesting things you learned in the class. 5. Something surprising or interesting a classmate or classmates said in the class. 6. Ways the information will help you in university and/or in the future. 7. Any points that you do not know or understand about the topic. 8. Anything else you would like to share about. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Summarize the main points learned in class. 2. Surprising or interesting things you learned in the class. 3. Any points that you do not know or understand about the topic. 4. What are two activities that you like to do in your free time? 5. How long have you been doing these activities? 6. What advice would you give about getting better at these activities? 7. Which English skill or skills did you use the most in class (reading, writing, listening or speaking)? 8. For your graded reader, did you know anything about your graded reader 2 before reading it? 9. For your graded reader, who are the main characters? (Write about at least 3) Describe their personalities. 10. For your graded reader, What is the relationship between them? 11. A goal for the next class. 12. Include the word count. Write over 150 words.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. A goal for the next class. 10. Include the word count. 	

Table 2*Debate Class Prompts for Lessons 2 and 8 in Fall 2020*

Lesson 2	Lesson 8
1. What did your team do well in the debate?	1. Summarize the main points learned in class.
2. What did the other team do well in the debate?	2. How did your team members share work in preparing for the debate? (Please give reasons and examples)
3. What can your team do to improve the debate?	3. What are some sources you found? Why did you choose them? Do you think the sources are strong? Why or why not?
4. What is a good system for taking notes in debate?	4. What are your team's three arguments? (Please give reasons and examples)
5. What is important when stating propositions?	5. What advice did the other team give you about your arguments?
6. What is important when constructing arguments ?	6. Whose debate style or technique did you like? Why?
7. What is important when making a summary ?	7. What are ways your team can work well together in Lesson 9's Debate test?
8. A goal for the next class.	8. A goal for the next class.
9. Include the word count.	9. Include the word count. (Write over 175 words in your paragraphs).

Students' Recommendations

One of the later prompts used in the data collection method of the final reflection journal was: "Do you have any advice about writing reflection journals?" To whom the advice was directed, the instructor or other students doing the activity, was not specified. Of the 55 students, all but one commented. Eight students gave no advice, five gave comments about their own experience, 22 gave advice to other students and 19 gave advice to the instructor. The data focusing only on instructor directed advice to improve the activity will be explored.

The themes that most commonly appeared were about the prompts appearing five times, sharing with other students appearing four times, an extension of the deadline appearing four times, more flexibility with the word count appearing three times, a review of the journal after submission appearing three times, and decreasing the frequency of the activity appearing twice. Below is a selection of student responses:

I think, if this journal have more option[s] such as [to] include the content of class, it will be better.

It is hard to write it, so I want you to extend the submission time or reduce the number of words.

Writing it is useful, but I think it doesn't have to be every lesson. Sometimes I have to give similar answers, so reduce the [number of] question[s] a little more.

I want to read this for others because I can find good perspectives that I can't find on my own.

My advice on it is to write in collaboration with friends at the beginning. The reason is that I was confused at the beginning because I didn't know how to write it correctly.

I think if we could add our comments at the end of the journals, it will be more useful.

The above data guided the secondary and tertiary implementation as well as prompting the instructor to reflect about her teaching practice.

Secondary Implementation

The spring 2021, the third semester almost fully online, was the second implementation of the reflection journals. Though different classes and students were taught, the above data was utilized. And according to the themes, adjusted for the reflection journals. First, the deadline was extended to 23:59 the day after the class. Originally, there was a reluctance that some students may forget the class contents the day after the class. However, if students felt too much pressure and the deadline caused stress, an extension may make the activity more meaningful to them. Of course students were able to submit the journals earlier on the learning platform, so those who felt writing the day of the lesson did so, while others submitted on the following day. Second, more prompts related to the class contexts were included related to the class material taught and it was suggested, but not required that students answer all the prompts. With this adjustment, the instructor hoped that it made writing easier for the students. Third, instead of a required word count, students were asked to write at least half a page. For those students who had trouble with that length, using the learning platform, the instructor made comments about questions that could be further answered or expanded on to help with their future journals. Furthermore, less attention was given to report-formatting guidelines as it was most likely the first time for students to use report-writing guidelines. This is unlike the primary implementation wherein students were studying about report formatting in the mandatory writing class. The instructor gave feedback about formatting, but after the sixth or seventh journal, no longer commented. Note that in fall semester students took the continuation class of spring semester's discussion class as a debate class, and the continuation class of spring semester's reading as a writing class. Fourth, to help students remember the contents of the journals, specifically their goals, at the beginning of class, the instructor asked the students to review the previous lesson's journals. Last, the number of journals was decreased by two, as the lessons before the mid-term and final-term test did not require journals as had been in the previous semester.

There was not a time for sharing journals, but in the third implementation for the first and second time the journals were used in class, time was given at the end of class for students to work in breakout rooms on the journals and then ask questions to the instructor. Appendix B is the lesson 3 journal activity for the reading class. See Table 3 and 4 for the reflection journal prompts for the mandatory reading and debate classes.

Table 3
Reading Class Prompts for Lesson 2 and 8 in Spring 2021

Lesson 2	Lesson 8
1. Summarize the main points you learned in class. 2. What did you do well in class? Why? 4. What do you want to do better next class? Why? 5. A goal for the next class. 6. Free writing: a. Why did you choose the graded reader? b. What graded reader did you choose? Why? c. Have you started reading it yet? How long do you think it will take to finish reading it? d. When is the best time for you to read, for example, in the mornings, on the train, before bed, at lunch, etc.? 7. Text word count.	1. Summarize the main points you learned in class. 2. What did you do well in class? Why? 3. What do you want to do better next class? Why?/ What is your goal for the next class? 4. Free writing: a. How would you define success? b. Name some people that you think are successful? Why do you think they are successful? 5. Text word count.

Table 4

Discussion Class Prompts for Lessons 2 and 8 in Spring 2021

Lesson 2	Lesson 8
1. Summarize the main points you learned in class. 2. What did you do well in class? Why? 3. What do you want to do better next class? Why? 4. A goal for the next class. 5. After Reading - Please answer the following: a. Do your friends or family give useful advice when you have problems? b. How does communication make people happy? Why? For example? 6. Text word count.	1. Summarize the main points you learned in class. 2. What did you do well in class? Why? 3. What do you want to do better next class? Why?/What are your goals for the next class? Why? 4. Next lesson is Discussion Test 2. Review the Discussion Test 1 Lesson 5 Reflection Journal. What did you do well in Discussion Test 1? What are your goals for Discussion Test 2? 5. Review the Discussion Skills 1 to 6 on page 104. Which are most difficult for you to use? Why? Review the Communication Skills on page 105, 1-3. Which are most difficult for you to use? Why? 6. After Reading - Please answer the following: a. When should schools start teaching English to children? Why? B. Should everyone in Japan study a foreign language? Why or why not? 7. Text word count.

Feedback or data was not formally collected about the second implementation. In lesson 1, students were clearly told the purpose of journals as a way to develop their English skills, and for setting goals. It was not an activity to correct English mistakes, but it was noted that common mistakes would be pointed out in the next lesson. As stated above, students were also told about issues with length and formatting by the instructor via the learning platform where the journals were submitted and graded. Another addition to the activity was that students were required to evaluate their writing. One of the prompts for week 10's journal is as follows:

Review the Reflection Journals for Week 2 and compare it with Reflection Journals for Week 9. What differences do you notice? Do you think your writing has improved? Why or why not?

It was the instructor's expectation that this prompt would give students the opportunity to analyze their performance and hopefully most had improved somewhat, thus potentially giving them confidence in their English proficiency.

Tertiary Implementation

With the review of the data in summer 2021 in preparation for a presentation, it was evident that some advice from students was still not incorporated into the second implementation. These two points were in regards to sharing journals with other classmates and adding the prompt for additional student comments about the lesson. Students were assigned a reflection journal in lesson 1 which followed a similar format to the second implementation. For the first point, at the start of lesson 2 and in proceeding lessons, students were given a few minutes to share their journals with another student in breakout rooms. They were asked to discuss any challenges they had with writing the journals in addition to whatever journal content they were comfortable sharing. Since the classes still remained online until the fifth lesson of fall semester, students were given the option to share screens with

each other. After the sharing activity ended and the class reassembled, the instructor asked if there were any questions about the journals. Though no questions were asked, it seemed like a worthwhile activity for students to share their writing and solve any formatting or content issues with one another.

The second point in this implementation was the addition of a final prompt, “*Optional*: If there is anything else that you would like to comment on about the class, feel free”. Since consent has not been requested from students, when the prompt was answered, informally their comments have been related to classroom management or general impressions of the class. If other instructors are interested in using this activity, it might be helpful to keep these types of questions related to the class as unexpected comments, perhaps personal comments unrelated to the lesson, may be shared in the journals. The time for this article is during lesson 3 of fall 2021. Appendix C provides lesson 3 journal activity for the writing class. In lessons 5 and 10, prompts to get feedback from learners about the activity such as the level of difficulty and how meaningful they perceive it to be in remembering the lessons, goal setting, self-evaluation and motivation will also be added to the journals. It is expected with this implementation, student voices will continue to shape the activity.

Instructor Reflections

Gathering data from the learners in fall semester 2020 and then analyzing it was beneficial for the instructor to better understand students’ opinions and gain insight into the effectiveness of the activity. In writing the article *Students’ Opinions about Reflection Journals (2021)*, it caused me to recognize that I am often inflexible in my teaching practice, for example, once a task is created that is to be used repeatedly, it is rarely changed even though it may not be viewed as meaningful or beneficial to the learners. Instead of only gathering comprehensive feedback at the end of the semester, I should have asked for feedback in the journals starting from earlier lessons, such as the level of difficulty and relevance of prompts, and then followed up with more requests for feedback in succeeding lessons during the first implementation. However, based on the fall 2020 semester’s lesson 13 journals, I am glad that I tried a new activity that incorporated reflection, self-assessment, and goal setting with English writing practice. It gave me more confidence in utilizing the task with the second and third implementations. I plan to continue to use this activity in my future teaching practice, in addition to seeking student feedback more consistently to tailor it to meet their needs. Furthermore, to those instructors who have not used reflection journals, or even for those currently using them in their practice, it is hoped that the above sections, particularly Tables 1 to 4, can be implemented or modified to meet the needs of their learners.

Conclusion

Student feedback is a valuable tool in reflective teaching practice. Using one reflective journal for students to provide their feedback to the initial implementation provided a guide to the instructor for the future implementations of this activity. Furthermore, using the journal as a tool for data collection, caused the instructor to closely analyze learner feedback. With learners’ consent, the data was then shared in articles and presentations, deepening the instructors’ awareness of the effectiveness of the implementations shaped by students’ voices. Data in the form of student voices is useful for reflective practice and guiding teaching practice.

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Appendix A

Writing Class, Fall 2020, Class Reflection Journal Lesson 3

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

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

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

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

Appendix B

Reading Class, Spring 2021, Class Reflection Journal Lesson 3

After each class, you will write a class reflection journal due the day after the class. Friday classes due date is Saturday before 23:59. Page 2 has a template for you to use. Please use the following prompts to help you:

1. Summarize the main points you learned in class.
2. What did you do well in class? Why?
3. What do you want to do better next class? Why?
4. A goal for the next class.
5. Free writing: Write about your exercise routine, for example, what activity or sport you do, where, when, etc. If you do not exercise, explain why or what you would like to do.
6. Text word count.

***Write at least half a page to receive full points. Formatting uses page 8 and 9 of "Becoming a Better Writer".*

REFLECTION JOURNAL GRADING INFORMATION: 3 POINTS		
Length 1 POINTS	Understandability 1 POINT	Due date 1 POINTS
Minimum length is written	Ideas could be understood	Submitted on time

Appendix C

Writing Class, Fall 2021, Class Reflection Journal Lesson 3

After each class, you will write a class reflection journal due the day after the class. The due date is Saturday before 23:59. Page 2 has a template for you to use. Please use the following prompts to help you:

1. Summarize the main points you learned in class.
2. What did you do well in class? Why?
3. What do you want to do better next class? /A goal for the next class. Why?
4. Use “Reading the Future” page 41’s checklist and write of a summary of this text in one sentence from “Longman Academic Writing” (Oshima & Hogue, 2017):
The topic sentence is usually the first or second sentence in a paragraph. Experienced writers often put topic sentences at the end, but the best place is usually at the beginning. A topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph gives readers an idea of what they will be reading. This helps them understand the paragraph more easily. (p. 55)
5. Free writing: As the seasons change from summer to fall, what is your favorite season? Why?
6. *Optional*: If there is anything else that you would like to comment on about the class, feel free.
7. Text word count.

***Write at least half a page to receive full points. Formatting uses page 8 and 9 of “Becoming a Better Writer”.*

REFLECTION JOURNAL GRADING INFORMATION: 3 POINTS		
Length 1 POINTS	Formatting 1 POINT	Due date 1 POINTS
Minimum length is written	Ideas could be understood	Submitted on time