

SHORT ARTICLES | 小論**Fostering Reflection: Helping Language Learners (and Teachers) to Take (and Release) Control****Richard J. Sampson***Gunma University, Japan***Email:** <sampson@gunma-u.ac.jp>

This short reflective article provides a narrative of my experiences with the implementation of a reflection project for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. The project encourages students to reflect on their experiences and beliefs, and, hopefully, gain more control of language learning for themselves.

Reflection and learning

For the better part of 20 years, I have been working in education contexts within Japan, from English conversation schools, to elementary and junior-high schools, *kosen* (colleges of technology), and finally tertiary education. The work environments in which I have found myself have either encouraged thinking about teaching and learning, or at least not hindered it. This “thinking about teaching and learning” has generally come in the form of reflective activities conducted with my students or other teachers (see e.g., Sampson, 2012, 2016). Reflection has been part of my constant attempts as a practitioner to better understand the young people with whom I work, and, hopefully, for them to understand themselves a little better also.

Reflection is thinking about our experiences. One of the common summaries of John Dewey’s approach to education illustrates its importance to learning: We do not learn from experience; we learn from reflecting on experience. In Dewey’s (1916/1944) reckoning, merely living through experiences is only going halfway - it is the process of then thinking back on these experiences from which we can truly learn and develop. In essence, reflection can be thought of as a systematic, rigorous, disciplined way of thinking, involving a process of experiencing, describing experience, distancing and analysis of experience, and subsequent intelligent action based on these deeper understandings (Rodgers, 2002). It is a meaning-making process that can assist learners and teachers to move from one experience into the next with a deeper understanding of its relationships with other experiences and ideas.

Recognizing a need for change

I began teaching at my current place of work - a small, regional university to the north of Tokyo - just over five years ago. One of my primary roles is overseeing a coordinated English curriculum for 550 first-year students in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) group. Courses in the curriculum are largely based around the development of listening and reading skills. In the past few years, the curriculum has seen marked progress in terms of academic outcomes measured by standardized tests. These scores are held up as evidence of the benefits of the curriculum for our students.

Nevertheless, I have always felt unease at the compulsory nature of these courses. It seems to be taken for granted that students will want to continue to study English even though it is not their major, or that they will have absorbed societal messages about the necessity of English (Sampson, 2017a) to such a degree that they will persist (meekly endure?) with study. However, no thought is given to the potential lack of self-determination in their learning (Ryan & Deci, 2002). For instance, at the commencement of every academic year, my colleagues and I conducted an orientation session about the compulsory English courses for the entire first-year STEM group. The session was devoted to providing an overview of the "how" of students' learning at a small scale, without zooming out to any explication of why they were going to be doing this. I was asked to present parts of this outline, yet I had a strong feeling of "frustrated authenticity" (Vannini & Burgess, 2009), a deep sense of conflict due to acting in ways that ran against my own values. I wanted to work more *with* learners to examine the interrelationships between *their* past and present learning experiences, *their* evolving identities, and *their* motivation to engage in lessons and develop as English users. While they were producing scores on tests that satisfied the University's need for measurable outcomes, what did my students think and feel about the meaning of their English learning?

Over the last five years, as I have become more accustomed to this work environment, I have also become better able to engage with my colleagues to gradually make changes that help learners to reflect. We conducted a needs analysis with potential employers of our STEM students (Sampson, 2017b), and now introduce findings regarding practical uses of occupational English and advice from company managers at the initial orientation session. I have been using reflective activities in action research with my individual classes, such as asking learners to reflect on the sources of their feelings when conducting LINE text chat with students from an Australian university. Notwithstanding, while these small-scale efforts certainly have their benefits, I also wanted to further encourage my fellow teachers to have students think more deeply about what they are learning, how they are learning, and what difficulties and successes they experience. And, crucially, at all of these stages, why.

Introducing a pilot reflection project

To this end, I sent out a call to my colleagues in the spring break before the 2017 academic year to discuss the possibility of using the Moodle online learning management system to provide reflective prompts for students. Three teachers responded. We commenced the project as a pilot from the spring semester of 2017 in nine of our classes. The reflections draw on the recognition of the importance of identity and self in language learning (Dörnyei, 2009). Prompts include such topics as learners' past experiences with English, ideas about effective language study and hopes for the actions of classmates, the felt expectations of others and messages from society about English, and future prospects of English use. At the end of each semester there is also a more general reflection about students' experiences in lessons, their perceptions of the reflection project, and their goals for near-future English study.

Over the course of their first year at university, students are prompted to write these eight reflective passages as homework assignments. They are given the choice of writing in English or Japanese. Personally, I encourage my students to write in English, as I feel it important to respect and foster their emerging English identities. Perhaps due to this nudge, all of my students construct their passages in English, although some insert an occasional Japanese word here or there. These passages are then brought into the classroom through interactive activities. For instance, students mingle to find similarities in their past experiences with English; critically discuss whether they agree or disagree with societal messages about English; choose a hope for action elicited from their classmates and set it as their goal for a lesson; create short videos showing a future failure with English and how to overcome this potentiality.

Some initial feedback

Since piloting, we have found that reflection gives learners a valuable chance to think about the meaning of their English studies, encounter new ideas from their classmates, discover that other students are motivated to study English, think about their actions in lessons and how they could improve, and to practice writing authentically in English. Here is some feedback we have received from the semester two, 2017 reflections (names are pseudonyms):

It was also good that we shared our own idea with each other. Some classmates have ideas which I did not come up with. I could know those ideas. On the other hand, I could know that most all of classmates have enthusiasm about English. Those two points stimulate me. (Moe)

When I wrote reflection project, it was able to teach me the importance of objective view. I noticed my weakness in English lesson, so I made an effort to overcome the weakness. I also noticed classmates thought out a method or a way to use English. For example, the one was making a note while listening to teacher's words. I thought it might be useful and I sometimes made a note in English. In addition to them, I was able to review what I learned in the class. In this way, reflection project reminded me of what I felt in the English class. And more reflection project I wrote, less distress writing English was. When I was high school student, there was few opportunity to write my reflection in English so I was happy to have chance to write English now. (Hiro)

As these two extracts hint, these reflective activities have provided our students with spaces to make realizations and connections, some of which might destabilize a current status quo - such as when Hiro notices and tries to overcome his weakness in English. Moreover, while we often mistake reflection as individual introspection, Dewey (1916/1944) argues that it needs to happen in community, in interaction with others. Sharing affirms the value of one's experience, allows us to see things anew from the perspectives of others, and provides support to engage and act (Rodgers, 2002). The power of sharing is also evident in these two extracts from learners, as when it assists Moe to realize that her classmates are motivated, or prompted Hiro to notice that his classmates "thought out a method or way to use English."

Working with other teachers has naturally presented its own challenges and rewards. As the following comments from my colleagues attest, at times we have struggled to incorporate the project into the regular curriculum, yet we have also gained insights to students that previously went unnoticed:

I feel very embarrassed that I didn't read students' reflections as they wrote them. I was just too busy. That's my goal for the second semester. (Terry)

It was really refreshing, to give students a chance to discuss this in class. I could get a feel for what students are going through. (Brian)

I can tell that the reflection project has had a positive impact on the students and has changed their perception of the purpose for studying English. ...Thank you again for this special gift to our students. (Brian)

Conclusion

As this reflection project is an ongoing work-in-progress, the jury is still out on its effectiveness. While the feedback we have received from participants has been predominantly positive, there are students for

whom the process of writing reflections - whether they be in English or Japanese - is challenging and at times tedious. Equally, it is my experience that some students find it difficult to understand why they are being asked to reflect, and why the related sharing activities take up English class time. These are undoubtedly points that we will need to refine in our rationales at the introduction of the project. Nevertheless, based on student comments to date, the reflective tasks do seem to assist them to take more self-determined control of their English learning. From another perspective, the project has prompted colleagues to try to understand more deeply the learners with whom we are interacting in our teaching.

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