

The Impact of the Reflective Journal on Learning Linguistics

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Abstract

This article examines the effect of using the reflective journal on learning linguistics at the university level. Reflective learning presupposes learners' active engagement in their learning through reflection; writing can be the best way to achieve that end. Consequently, an experimental study was designed for first-year students of English at Badji Mokhtar University, Annaba. For ten sessions, eighteen students used the reflective journal as a tool of reflection in every linguistics session. The results of this study showed the positive effect of this tool on learning linguistics, in developing learners' skills and even in raising the success rate.

ملخص

يتناول هذا المقال تأثير استخدام مجلة التفكير في تعلم اللسانيات على المستوى الجامعي. يتطلب التعلم بالتفكير متعلمين فعالين. وأفضل وسيلة لذلك إشراكهم في الكتابة عن تعلمهم. وقد صممت هذه الدراسة التجريبية لطلاب السنة الأولى في اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة باجي مختار - عنابة. استخدم ثمانية عشر طالبا المجلة أداة للتفكير في وحدة اللسانيات لمدة عشر حصص. وأظهرت نتائج هذه الدراسة الأثر الإيجابي لهذه الأداة على تعلم اللسانيات وتطوير مهارات الطلاب وزيادة نسبة النجاح.

Introduction:

With the shift from the traditional teacher-centered learning to the student-centered situation and with the intention of empowering students with the spirit of knowledge, reflection has gained an immense interest in the field of second/foreign language learning. Light has been shed on the realm of reflection in an attempt to find out the relation between reflection, experience and learning. In fact, success is the result of a cycle of deep thinking, planning and acting; change is not automatic but is a process that takes time.

Therefore, in an attempt to find out whether implementing the reflective approach in the classroom can develop students' awareness of their learning habits and increase their learning skills in linguistics, we will use the reflective journal as a tool of reflection.

1. Reflection and Learning

According to ⁽¹⁾, the term 'reflection' is derived from the Latin term 'reflectere' meaning to 'bend back' like a mirror- making visible what is apparent to others⁽²⁾. argues that the origin of the idea of 'reflective thought' was introduced by ⁽³⁾ who defines it as: "Active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and further conclusion to which it tends" ⁽³⁾: 6).

Accordingly, the constructivists see that learning is founded on the premise that by reflecting on experiences, students construct their own understanding of the world they live in. ⁽⁴⁾ adds that constructivism embodies a commitment to a constant self-examination through reflection. Besides, ⁽⁵⁾ and ⁽⁶⁾ advocate that effective learning occurs when students actively process the information in a way that is meaningful to them. Moreover, ⁽⁷⁾ emphasises that the central rationale behind teaching is to provide well-organized experiences in order to accelerate the process of learning; the ultimate aim is to enable learners to make well-thoughtful choices in solving problems. He clarifies that “learning occurs whenever one adopts new, or modifies existing, behaviour patterns in a way which has some influence on future performance or attitudes” (Ibid: 81).

Moreover, by analyzing Dewey’s writings on reflection, ⁽⁸⁾ refers to four criteria that he attributes to reflection: 1-it is a meaning making process out of experiences; 2- it is a rigorous way of thinking that includes scientific spirit; 3- it develops through interaction in a supportive community and 4- it includes a set of positive attitudes towards oneself: whole-heartedness, open-mindedness and responsibility which all develop readiness to engage in reflection. Subsequently, ⁽⁹⁾ further asserts that academic reflection is used to maintain learning and is followed by a planned activity.

2. Experiential Learning

During the twentieth century, experiences gained central role in the theories of learning. ⁽¹⁰⁾ and ⁽¹¹⁾ show that reflection has an important role in bridging the gap between the practical experience and the theoretical conceptualization. They also advocate that reflecting on experiences is the core of experiential learning and without reflecting on their learning, students are constantly expected to make the same mistakes. In addition, ⁽¹²⁾ (2001: 10) highlights that reflection involves students’ thoughts and emotions.

Dewey’s book *Experience and Education*⁽¹³⁾ deals with experiential learning where knowledge is constructed through experience in a social context. He claims that all human experiences are social and involve contact and communication. According to his conceptualization, teachers’ role lies in organizing the content and facilitating appropriate learning experiences to their students; hence, teachers are responsible for developing students’ knowledge of both the subject matter and of themselves as individuals. Dewey clarifies that planning for experiential learning is more difficult than planning for traditional learning, and the difficulty lies in selecting the appropriate experiences for students.

Departing from Dewey’s writings, ⁽⁸⁾ has proposed four steps for the experiential learning: 1-presence to the experience; 2-description of the experience; 3-analysis of the experience and 4-intelligent action. Likewise, Kolb (1984, cited in , ⁽¹⁰⁾: p. 3) has proposed an Experiential Learning Cycle that involves four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. In concrete experience, students learn by intuition without emphasis on the experience; after that reflective observation deals with learning via perception and focusing on the experience on a personal basis by careful observation of ideas and situations. Then, the abstract conceptualization refers to learning by meticulous thinking, using approaches to structure and frame the new knowledge. It involves

generalization, conclusion and hypothesis for the experience made. The last orientation, active experimentation gives students an opportunity to master the new understanding; it is learning in action. However, experiential learning is not linear, but a recursive process of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting.

3. Reflective Learning

Reflective learning refers to the process of reflecting on one's learning that leads to certain transformations and enhancements. Reflective learning implies learner's active role in their learning; however, ⁽¹⁴⁾ (1998: 43) explains that learners are active in the sense that they participate in the activities provided but passive in terms of their learning; they expect to be told how to learn. Moreover, ⁽¹⁵⁾ (2007, p: 36) define reflective learning as an intentional social process, where context and experience are acknowledged, in which learners are active individuals. They add that learners should be wholly present, engaging with others, open to challenge, and the outcome involves transformation as well as improvement for both individuals and their environment.

However, ⁽¹⁶⁾ finds out that students' previous experiences of schooling allow them little opportunities to take charge of their learning and to reflect on them. He adds that getting rid of the old learning habits needs time and patience. Likewise, ⁽¹⁷⁾ highlight that reflection is neither a process that can be rushed nor one that has to occur at a particular time. ⁽¹⁸⁾ further clarifies that successful reflection is not an innate capacity; it is a process that develops through time. In addition, ⁽¹⁹⁾ draws attention that the best means of reflection would involve some form of writing.

4. Method

This study was conducted in the academic year 2009-2010 in the department of English, Badji Mokhtar University- Annaba. Along ten sessions of one hour and half, 18 first-year students were involved in the experiment in the module of linguistics. These students were between 18 and 22 years old with six years of background knowledge in English.

The first semester exam results were not promising and linguistics seemed a difficult module to learn. Consequently, we were interested in finding out if these students were involved in a reflective learning approach, could they improve their level in linguistics. We have used the reflective journal as a research tool to evidence their reflections. ⁽²⁰⁾ sees the reflective journal as an effective vehicle for reflection on one's learning. Besides, ⁽²¹⁾ (2009: 22) highlights that journal writing is based on the concepts of writing to learn, "Writing to learn is thinking as you write". He adds that journal writing requires students to stop being observers and be participants in their learning. Similarly, ⁽²²⁾ sees that through reflection on their journals, students will develop their own guidelines for achieving personal growth and learning progress. Therefore, students' reflective journals serve as an investigation tool to get more information about the students under study: what they learned, how they learned, how they felt and what their future learning plans are.

During the first session of the implementation of the reflective journal writing, the teacher had clarified its merits in developing students' reflection, responsibility and autonomy in learning linguistics. By the end of every session, students will reflect in their journals about the lesson dealt with, from fifteen to twenty minutes, and their

reflection will be guided by these questions: what have you learned? How did you feel about your learning? What difficulties do you still have in understanding the lesson? And how do you plan to solve them? In addition, every entry should include the date, lesson's title and ends with (a) probable question (s) that might be asked about the lesson in the exam.

The teacher insisted on students' honesty and truthfulness while writing the reflective learning entries; *"Tell your journal all the answers as if you were speaking with yourselves"*. The teacher further explained that the journals will not be graded and no need to worry about the mistakes. In addition, the students were informed that in every session some students -with their own will- are going to read their previous session's writings in order to discuss the learning strengths and weaknesses the entries dealt with. Besides, from one time to another the students will exchange their journals for a peer review in an attempt to be more aware of how the other feels and learns.

The implementation of the reflective journal was not easy, and the teacher faced hard times in getting some students into the habit of writing about their learning in the journals- which they sometimes forget to bring; the journal was an extra burden for them.

5. Findings and Discussion

After the first month of the experiment, the classroom atmosphere became less tense and the students were more comfortable in writing their journals. They became more motivated and involved in their learning of linguistics. Besides, they liked reading their journals and discussing the issues that troubled them in learning linguistics- students were no more the isolated islands.

By the end of the last session of the second semester, 18 reflective journals have been collected for analysis according to a rubric designed by the teacher as follows:

High: The journal contains all the entries from the first date. All the questions are thoroughly answered with some examples and further explanation. Both thoughts and feelings are included in all the entries

Satisfactory: The journal contains all the entries except the first one. All the questions are less thoroughly answered with examples and further explanations. Thoughts and feelings are included in some entries.

Limited: Two or three entries are missing. All the questions are shallowly answered with either examples or explanations. Thoughts and feelings are included in few entries.

Unsatisfactory: More than three entries are missing. Not all the questions are answered. Thoughts and feelings are absent in all the entries.

The reflective journals can be analyzed in two different ways since not all the students began writing their journals from the same date. However, taking the two dates of first entry writing and accounting for the rubric's criteria, the journals can be qualified as shown in table1 (Appendix 1).

Dates	16	06	Total
Criteria	March	April	
High	1	0	1
Satisfactory	5	0	5
Limited	5	2	7
Unsatisfactory	1	4	5
Total	12	6	18

Table 1: The Reflective Journals' Analysis

Considering the date of the first entry writing as shown in table1, the journals written from 16th of March are as follows: (1) high, (5) satisfactory, (5) limited and (1) unsatisfactory. However, those written from the 6th of April are either limited (2) or unsatisfactory (5). This implies that the first session of the implementation of the journal was very crucial for the quality of the journals' writing. Moreover, launching the reflective journal experiment during the last week before the spring holidays prompted some students to learn from their poor results in the first semester exam and plan for better learning results. For the others, who started on April 6th, the journal was just a learning task to be done. These latter did not invest their time in writing their journals; they just did it.

Furthermore, table1 shows that those who wrote high or satisfactory journals show an inner interest in change to be better students. They want to be aware of themselves-thoughts and feelings- in an effort to discover strategies leading to success. These students showed high motivation in reflecting on their learning: every lesson with its entry including recognition of their strengths and weaknesses and a plan for lesson revision. In fact, the reflective journal has an undeniable positive effect on some students' attitudes towards their learning, the subject matter-linguistics- and even themselves; they are more aware of the rate of their learning. These students have developed some cognitive and metacognitive skills to manage better their learning.

Conversely, journals which were either limited or unsatisfactory reflect students' lack of enthusiasm to write journals, their poor vocabulary, the fear to express their feelings or just because they were absent during many sessions. Through reading these journals for analysis, we felt that these students were writing in a very abrupt way. Besides, it was very clear that these students have problems with writing.

Furthermore, students were asked to write about the benefits of the reflective journal in learning linguistics in the last session. The majority guaranteed that the reflective journal has developed their learning skills. Here are some answers:

Student 1: *"This method gave me the opportunity to be more serious in the classroom, also at home. It facilitates the revision and the communication with the teacher when you prepare the lesson".*

Student 2: *"From the new method, I learned more than the first: more new words and key words; now I can do the summary by keeping the important ideas and let the rest".*

Student 3: *“Now we are able to make a summary alone without any difficulties”*.

Student 4: *“We can understand by asking questions about the lesson in the journal”*.

Then, the reflective journal has raised students' sense of responsibility. It has also facilitated comprehension, revision and summary writing. Besides, the reflective journal was the source of developing students' self management skills, self-awareness and self-confidence as follows:

Student 5: *“I organize better my time, I prepare the lesson before the session, and it is useful to take notes”*

Student 6: *“The journal has a big advantage. It helps me to revise and the same time control myself by the promises. I feel relaxed when I write it. In my future life when I become a teacher I will follow the method of the journal because it is a useful method”*.

Note: Here by *“the promises”*, student 6 refers to the revision plan that s/he designed in the reflective journal at the end of every session.

Student 7: *“The journal obliges me to revise the lessons; I love this method”*.

The verb *“obliges”* implies that student 7 written reflections are actions to take and not just words on papers.

Student 8: *“The journal helps me to find my difficulties and how to solve them. The reflective journal was an important step for me. It helped me in revising and summarizing and knowing my feelings”*

Student 9: *“I have learnt from this experience how to revise my lessons well and I learnt that tiredness brings success and happiness, nothing comes easily, the student should work hard, I liked the idea of the journal very much, it is helpful and practical for the student who really wants to succeed”*.

Student 10: *“The journal is useful in my study, it taught me to revise my lessons every day, and to express my feelings about the lesson and ask questions when I have difficulties. And I seek to solve the problem. It taught me the lesson of self-confidence”*.

These comments reveal the following positive effects of the reflective journal on learning linguistics:

- It leads to serious work and more concentration: before, during and after the lesson.
- It facilitates revision and memorization of new vocabulary and concepts.
- It develops the learning skill (note taking, summaries, asking and answering questions about each lesson).
- It promotes self-reliance, self- control and self-confidence.
- It provides an opportunity to be aware of one's learning strategies and exchange them with the class-mates.
- It develops awareness of one's learning difficulties and how to plan to solve them; that is, it develops students' metacognitive skills.
- It develops awareness of one's feelings, thoughts and actions.
- It opens a communication channel: student-student and student- teacher.
- Every entry is a new lesson revision.

Accordingly, students' results in the second semester exam confirm the positive impact of the reflective journal on their learning. In the second semester, 56.52% succeeded in linguistics while only 34.78% did in the first semester. In fact, the students under study became more interested in the second semester and made more effort to learn by themselves. Furthermore, students written reflections represented a feedback that the teacher has long yearned for because in their oral feedback all is clear and all is easy, and then the exams come with unexpected surprises.

Conclusion

Students' reflective journals bridged the gap not only between the student and his/her learning, but even between the student and his/her classmates. This research has proven that success is a decision taken by the students, while the teacher's role lies in plunging them in different learning experiences from which they have to learn from themselves. Saying so, this does not undermine teacher's crucial role in providing the appropriate conditions of trust, confidence and motivation for implementing the reflective approach in one's classroom. In fact, students' level of awareness of their own learning has increased. They become aware of themselves, the subject matter, their learning strengths and difficulties, but some students still need more time to plan for a more successful learning of linguistics. In addition, a new comfortable relaxing classroom atmosphere has developed; however, one should be aware that the reflective journal did not work for all the learners and if it did, not on the same rate. Change needs time.

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