

REFLECTIVE JOURNALS – ITS BENEFITS AND IMPLEMENTATION

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Abstract

Reflective journals have been used in language teaching and learning for many years. Many studies on reflective journals have shown that they are powerful tools to promote autonomy and improve students' learning. However, the use of reflective journals is still limited at the English Department, Gialai Teachers' Training College, Gialai province, Vietnam.

This paper presents a case study of how a teacher at Gialai Teachers' Training College applied reflective journals in one of her English-majored classes for the first time. The study was conducted in the teacher's attempt to explore the benefits of reflective journal writing in her own teaching context. The study was carried out in an Integrated Skills course. The samples consisted of 35 third-year students who were about to become teachers of English in a few months. The data was quantitatively collected by means of a questionnaire distributed after the course. The result of the study indicated the positive benefits of reflective journal writing including improving students' writing skills, helping students acquire knowledge authentically, and somehow enhancing their critical thinking skills by giving them an opportunity to express their opinions about the teacher's teaching. Furthermore, the result pointed out that students' reflective journals also helped the teacher improve her professional knowledge and pedagogy as well. The findings put forward recommendations for further application of reflective journals in a wider context.

1. Introduction

Reflective journals have been used in language teaching and learning for many years. Many studies on reflective journals suggested that they have been applied in language classroom worthwhile as powerful tools to promote autonomy, improve students' learning. O'Connell and Dymont (2006) explored the benefits of journaling in motivating students in the process of reflecting on their own learning and improving their own writing skills. Similarly, Farrah (2011) examined the benefits of reflective journaling on improving English writing skills, increasing motivation, enhancing creativity and critical thinking among university students. Lear (2011) investigated the impact of guided reflective journals on improving certain domains of intonation

as well as increasing motivation and developing metacognitive awareness. Meral Çapar (2014) conducted a study to investigate the extent to which EFL learners could reflect on their essays in an EFL writing course and whether guidance of the teacher could help them to improve their reflections. The findings indicate that with appropriate training, autonomy may be achieved in a writing course through enhancing reflection on the learning process.

Although it is evident that reflective journal writing has widely been studied and used all over the world, there seemed to be little research on the effectiveness of journaling in English classrooms in Vietnam. The case is particularly true at the English Department, Gialai Teachers' Training College, Gialai province, Vietnam. The proved usefulness of reflective journaling and the absence of this strategy in her teaching environment urged the teacher to investigate the benefits of reflective journals in her own teaching context.

2. Theoretical background

The use of reflective journals in language teaching and learning is deeply rooted in several theories. Richards and Lockhard (1996) introduced the “reflective approach” to teaching in second language classrooms. Their theory focuses on “a number of important dimensions of teaching, including teachers’ and learners’ beliefs, teachers’ decision making, and teachers’ and learners’ roles” (p. ix). Farrell (2012) illustrated how language teachers can use reflective writing as a mean of reflective practice for professional development purposes. According to Spalding and Wilson (2002), reflective journals create positive student - instructor relationship and offer writers a record of experiences and personal growth. Moon (1999) and Evans (2007) agreed that reflective learning helps students to gain and develop a deeper style of learning.

According to an article posted by Northern Illinois University, the process of reflective writing is as follow:

“Write, record

Describe the situation (the course, the context)

Who was involved with the situation?

What did they have to do with the situation?

Reflect, think about

What are your reactions?

What are your feelings?

What are the good and the bad aspects of the situation?

What you have learned?

Analyze, explain, gain insight

What was really going on?

What sense can you make of the situation?
Can you integrate theory into the experience/situation?
Can you demonstrate an improved awareness and self-development because of the situation?

Conclusions

What can be concluded in a general and specific sense from this situation/experience and the analyses you have undertaken?

Personal action plan

What are you going to do differently in this type of situation next time?
What steps are you going to take on the basis of what you have learned?"

(Source: facdev@niu.edu, <http://facdev.niu.edu>, 815.753.0595)

Based on a study prepared by The Learning Centre, The University of New South Wales in 2008, Farrah (2012) listed the characteristics of reflective writing as follow:

- your response to experiences, opinions, events or new information
- your response to thoughts and feelings
- a way of thinking to explore your learning
- an opportunity to gain self-knowledge
- a way to achieve clarity and better understanding of what you are learning
- a chance to develop and reinforce writing skills
- a way of making meaning out of what you study

(Source: An - Najah Univ. J. Res. (Humanities). Vol. 26(4), 2012)

Based on the reviewed literature, it is noticed that reflective journal writing can benefit learners beyond gaining autonomy and improving learning. In addition, it helps to build learner – teacher relationship and improve teaching in some way.

3. Purpose of the study

This paper sought to explore the benefits of writing reflective journals to students majored of English at Gialai Teachers' Training College. It also aims at examining the gains that students' reflective journals bring to the teacher.

4. The method and instruments of the study

The data was both qualitatively and quantitatively collected through participants' journals and a questionnaire on their opinions of the reflective journal writing.

5. The study

5.1. The context of experience and statement of problem

Since the participants were freshmen at Gialai College, the teacher has worked with them in a number of courses including Speaking, Integrated Skills, Cross Cultural Communication and Teaching Methodology. Over the past two years, the teacher has noticed some problems from the

students that she longed to improve. Firstly, the students were so passive that they just did what they were asked to do; they did not raise any questions to make sure they understood the teacher's instructions. Secondly, the students' writing skills were quite poor; their writing products were full of grammatical mistakes with vulgar expressions. Consequently, they were afraid of writing and occasionally failed to hand in their writing works. Thirdly, in the methodology course, the students did not have much opportunity for practicing designing lesson plans. They did not have a clear concept of what the objectives of a lesson were and what they could do to achieve the objectives. These situations have concerned the teacher greatly and driven her to thinking of solutions for the problems in her next course with the class.

5.2. The participants and the course

The sample for the study consisted of 35 English-majored students who were in their third year and were about to become teachers of English in a few months. The study was taken during an Integrated Skills course which was 75 periods in length including lessons and test time. This is a textbook based course which covered from Module 8 to Module 12 in the book *New Cutting Edge – Intermediate level* (Cunningham S. and Moor P. 2005). The students had two classes each week, one lasts two periods and the other was 3 periods.

5.3. Procedure

Adapting the model process of reflective writing posted by Northern Illinois University, we adopted the following procedure:

Write, record: The participants were encouraged to write reflective journals after each lesson based on a form given by the teacher. The forms might be a set of questions, a table in which students filled in the required information or both questions and table. Although the journals' formats were not the same during the course, students' writing had to answer the following questions: What was happening during the lesson, what activities were conducted, what did you have to do in each activity?

Reflect, think about: After describing the situation, students answered the questions: Did you enjoy the activities, what did you learn from the lesson?

Analyze, explain, gain insight: In this stage, students gave their comments or explanation for their preference for the class activities

Conclusions: In this stage, students gave their general thoughts, feelings and comments about the lesson and about what they learnt by answering the question: Do you think the teacher achieved her objectives?

Personal action plan: This step is not only for the students but also for the teacher. The students reflected on what they had gained and what they needed to learn more, and then planned for further actions. The teacher read students' writing and adjusted her teaching to make it more effective.

5.4. Data collection

The data were collected through participants' written reflections and the questionnaire on their opinions of the journal writing and its strengths and drawbacks. The information presented in participants' journals was considered by the teacher and then changes were made to enhance

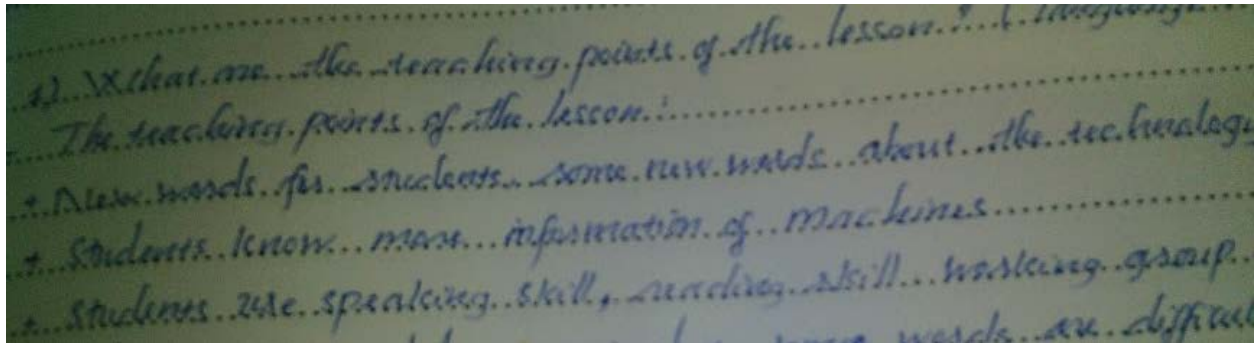
the effectiveness of the following lessons. The questionnaire was developed based on the literature review conducted by the researcher and was suitable for examining participants' attitudes towards reflective journal writing. The questionnaire consisted of 5 items which were structured according to 3 dimensions including *improving learning*, *gaining autonomy*, and *value to teaching and learning*. Quantitative data were analyzed statistically.

5.5. Findings and discussion

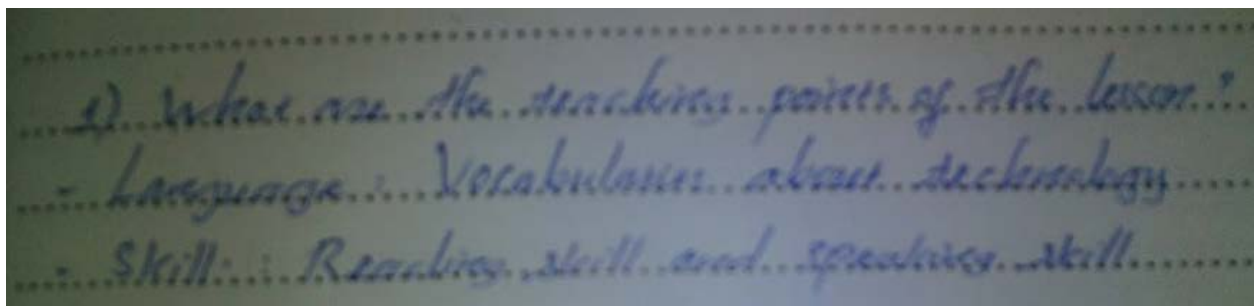
This section presents some students' journals and the teacher's reactions to the collected information. The results of the questionnaire are also presented in this section.

5.5.1. Students' journals

As mentioned above, the writing of reflective journals was a voluntary exercise but by the end of the course, the majority of the students wrote at least seven journals and some write more than fifteen ones. During the first module of the course, the participants were asked to answer 5 questions. The questions were as follow: *What are the teaching points of the lessons? What activities were conducted? What activity did you like best? What techniques did the teacher use to teach the skills? Do you think the teacher achieved her objectives?* These questions focused on the structure of a lesson plan and aimed at recalling students' memory of the lesson and collecting their opinions about the teacher's teaching as well. At first, the students could not identify what teaching points or teaching techniques were. The researcher read students' writing every day and gave feedback to students before they began to write their next journals. The pictures below shows 2 pieces of one student's writing before and after the feedback.

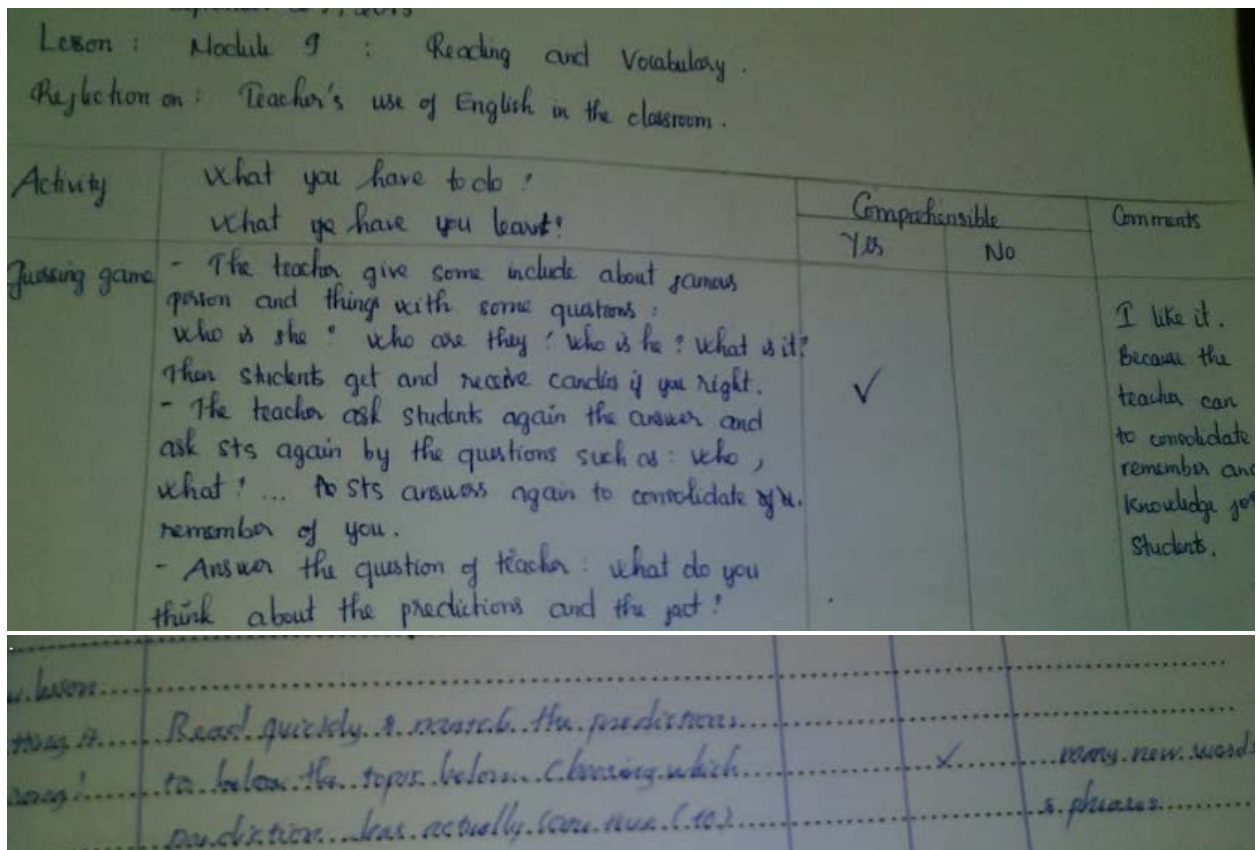


Picture 1: Student's writing before the feedback



Picture 2: Student's writing after the feedback

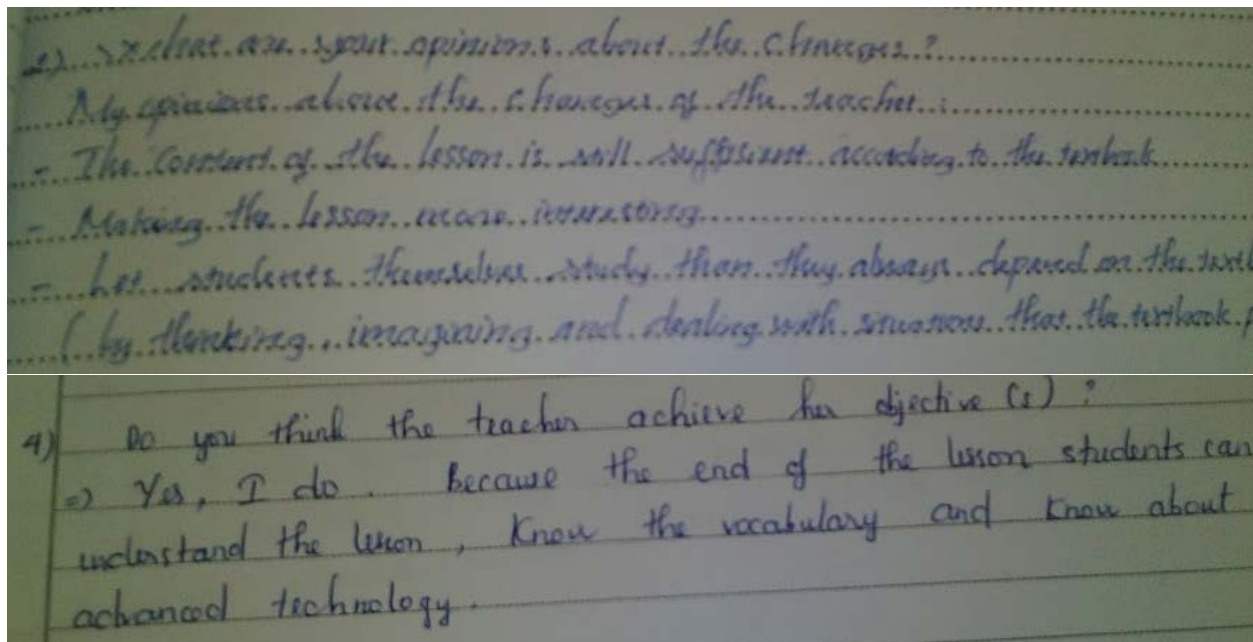
As shown in picture 1, the student could not describe the teaching points of the lesson in an appropriate way. However, in picture 2, after receiving the teacher's feedback, he could use professional terms such as "Language" and "Skill" when mentioning to teaching points. This is an example of how the teacher dealt with students' journals. In answering to the question "Do you think the teacher achieve her objectives?", 3 out of 35 students said that they did not understand the lesson because the teacher used too much English in class. Although these students were among the minority, their opinions were put into consideration. Once the participants were familiar with the journal writing and the first module was over, the researcher changed the focus of the reflection. This time, the focus was on the teacher's use of English in class. In order to collect students' ideas about this issue, the teacher designed a form in which students described what they did in each activity and whether they understood about what to do in each activity or not. The pictures below illustrate what students wrote in their journals.



This format of journals was kept for a module-length (6 lessons). Before every new lesson, the teacher reviewed general ideas from whole class' journals in front of the class. Based on what she read from students' writing, the teacher drew a conclusion that her use of English was appropriate to most of the students, which meant that those whole could not follow the lessons had to get extra support from their fellows or the teacher outside class.

The process took place over a period of 15 weeks during which the focus of reflection was changed after every module (3 weeks). The diversity in the content and format of the structured journals helps keeping students away from getting bored with the writing and at the same time, it serves the teacher's purposes of recalling students' knowledge gained during the present course and consolidating their teaching methodology knowledge from the previous course.

In addition to giving feedback to students' writing, the teacher also used students' feedback to her teaching to make her lessons more effective. She kept conducting the activities that aroused student's interests and editing the ones that were disapproved by the students. The pictures below show students' feedback to the teacher's teaching.



It can be seen that the reflective journal writing has formed the habit of writing among students. Students are motivated because their "voice" is considered seriously through the regular feedback. Furthermore, students' writing can also stimulate the teacher to prepare her lesson carefully before class. The learner – teacher relationship, therefore, is improved in some way.

5.5.2. The questionnaire

The results of the questionnaire are shown in the table below

Dimensions	Options	Number	Percentage (%)
Improving learning	Reflective journal writing helped to improve your writing skills	31	88,6
	Reflective journal writing helped to consolidate your knowledge of teaching methodology	13	37,1
	Reflective journal writing helped you memorize the lessons better	32	91,4
	You learnt nothing from writing reflective journals	1	2,8
Gaining autonomy	Reflective journal writing helped you talk about your experiences	32	91,4
	Reflective journal writing helped to identify what you do well and what you need to learn more	22	62,8
	Reflective journal writing was an opportunity to gain self-knowledge	26	74,3
	You did not understand what you are supposed to write in your journals	0	0
Value to teaching and learning	Your reflective journals helped the teacher understand the progress of her students	26	74,3
	Your reflective journals gave the teacher ideas in planning what to teach in her next lesson	27	77,1
	Your reflective journals helped the teacher teach more effectively	22	62,8
	Reflective journal writing helped you develop critical thinking skills	19	54,2
	Reflective journal writing is useful for your study	34	97,2
	Reflective journal writing is a waste of time	1	2,8
	Reflective journal writing should be encouraged / continued	34	97,2

As the table reveals, a great proportion of participants agreed that reflective journal writing helps to improve their learning in general, and improve their writing skills and memorization of the lesson in particular. However, out of the teacher's expectation, only one third of the participants acknowledged the usefulness of their journal writing to recalling their teaching methodology knowledge.

In terms of gaining autonomy, the results indicate that reflective journal writing helps students understand what they are learning and how they learn it. This gives students an opportunity to gain self-knowledge and prepare themselves for what to learn next.

Finally, the last element of the reflection is the value that reflective journal writing sets on teaching and learning. It is noticed from the results that both the students and the teacher can benefit from students' reflective journals. The reflection helps to develop students' critical thinking skills. Reading students' journals helps the teacher improve the effectiveness of her teaching in particular and improve her professional knowledge in general.

6. Conclusion and implementation

This study was an attempt to explore the benefits of reflective journal writing in the researcher's teaching context. The results of the study show that both the students and the teacher benefited a lot from students' reflective journals. Firstly, students' writing skills improved thanks to regular practice. Secondly, the reflective journal writing helped to increase students' learning autonomy and helped them to acquire knowledge authentically. Moreover, the findings indicate that the journal writing contributed to enhance students' critical thinking skills. Finally, the results prove that students' reflective journal helped to improve the teacher's professional knowledge and pedagogy as well. However, the findings show that students' reflection did not help them much in consolidating the knowledge that they learnt from a previous course (the teaching methodology course). This put forwards recommendations for the researcher to do further research on this issue.

Based on the results of this study, the researcher recommends that the use of reflective journal writing should be implemented as an integral part in Integrated and Writing courses. Further studies should be carried out in order to investigate more benefits of reflective journal writing in language teaching.

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