

Theories on Self-Reflection in Education

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Abstract

Self-reflection can be recognized as a process that gives students opportunities to stop and be reflective about the learning that has taken place (Davies, Herbst, & Busick, 2013). This study provides analysis of the existing theoretical background on the value and role of learner self-reflection in education in general and language education in particular. This paper will also discuss the perspectives of active classroom research based on the studies on reflective learning through journal writing. In addition, it will overview the contribution to the learners' awareness of journal writing as a medium of self-reflection of their language skill development and progress. In conclusion, this paper will suggest possible outcomes of reflective learning, such as pedagogical implications of perception, goal-setting, learning difficulties and motivation, together with curriculum-related aspects, such as setting customized curricular goals and adjusting activity choices.

Keywords: Self-reflection, Pedagogy, Teacher Development, Learner Development, Learner Autonomy

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Introduction

Self-reflection and its contribution to the field of general learner development has gathered abundant attention in research literature over recent years. The recognition of its significance in terms of learners' empowerment, encouragement and taking responsibility for their learning is undeniable. It can naturally activate further engagement with learning material, deepen learners' understanding of the topic and reinforce independent thinking and in that way create an effective learning environment. (Park 2003, Little 2007).

While on the learners' side the benefits could be clear and comprehensible (Noels 1999), the real challenge lies in finding similar benefits on the educators' side. This paper was designed in order to assist the educators on their way to deeper understanding and discovery of the implicit pedagogical value of their learners' metacognitive reflective processes, by describing the views on the general roles of self-reflection in pedagogy in the literature and offering an overview of the most common mediums of self-reflection in language pedagogy and their conceivable benefits for language educators.

The theoretical background that would be demonstrated in the next section and relevant for this research included research on the definition of self-reflection and its role in education in general, journal writing as reflection medium, and learner autonomy.

The Overview of Self-Reflection in the Literature

The research literature below illustrates all the possible connections between students' self-evaluation, self-reflection, autonomy development and diary writing in EFL classroom. It elaborates on theoretical background to the role of self-reflection in the learning process in general and second-language learning in particular. It also provides valuable explanation of the purposes diary entries serve as conceivable self-reflective medium in terms of building learner metacognitive awareness of their own learning and mastering successful learning behaviors as life-skill. (Sevilla, Gamboa, 2016)

Research on Self-reflection

The metacognitive process of self-reflection has received attention in the literature from various angles such as contribution to learning environment, learning process, learning and teaching styles. For instance, Sivasubramaniam (2011) has considered the basic and irreplaceable elements of constructivist learning environments, which include: the view of knowledge as mutually constructed between learners and instructors, the use of authentic activities and tasks, the provision of "stimulus for reflecting on experience", and the acknowledgement of "collaborative construction of knowledge through interpersonal associations/negotiations" (p.9). In pedagogical practice, such principles are to be translated into opportunities for meaningful reflective learning process, student initiated goal-setting in the classroom, learner autonomy and initiative, and opportunities to become active members of the learning community and to be able to drive lessons and "negotiate strategies and alter content" (Watson, 2001, pp. 140).

In the context of autonomous learning skills development and student-initiated goal-setting it was also claimed that self-reflection can be harmonized with the principles of student-centered learning that has called the attention of many scholars in the past few decades. (e.g., Gronich, 2004; Frances and Rose, 2009; Hickman, 2010; and Qasem, 2010 as cited in Sevilla and Gamboa, 2016)

Stevens and Cooper (2009) provide further perspectives on the nature of reflection and learning from experiences based on the work by John Dewey. They focus on how to perform effective reflection, describing it as an active, intentional, and journalistic cycle. (Stevens and Cooper, 2009 as cited in Desjarlais and Smith, 2011)

Dewey (1991) refers to reflection as to an active and intentional process that can begin with some discomfort with an experience and end with learning and deeper insights. According to Dewey, aspects of reflective thought include perplexity, elaboration, generation hypothesis, comparing hypothesizes, and taking action. In his later work Dewey emphasizes the positive roles reflection might play in fostering students' self-reflection, critical thinking, and in a demonstrable way development of professional values or skills. Dewey has defined reflection as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends" (p.9)

Boud et al. (1985) define reflection in the context of learning and equally to Dewey emphasize one's personal experience as the object of reflection, as referring to "those intellectual and affective activities that individuals engage into explore their experience, which leads to new understanding and appreciations" (Boud et al., 1985, p.19 as quoted in Lew and Schmidt, 2011, p.530). Moon (1999) describes reflection as a "form of mental processing with a purpose and/or anticipated outcome that is applied to relatively complex or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution" (p. 23). Lew and Schmidt (2011) view self-reflection as a:

Process which the learner undergoes to look back on his past learning experiences and what he did to enable learning to occur (i.e. self-reflection on how the learning took place) and the exploration of connections between the knowledge that was taught and learner's own ideas about them (i.e. self-reflection on what was learned). The authors claim that consistent engagement in both processes by the learners by practicing self-reflection lead to better academic achievement.

Finally, self-reflection, as seen by Lew and Schmidt (2011), reflects the view of self-reflection by Steven and Cooper (2009). As Steven and Cooper describe it and summarize the matter in an inclusive way, the reflective phase involves focusing on what as experience means and how it is related to past learning. In comparison, Schon (1983) has two processes: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, which he describes as components of the development of expertise. In terms of learner benefits from the process, some studies see self-reflection as a tool for motivating and enhancing learning, fostering autonomy and shifting some of the learning responsibilities from the instructor to the learner. (Noels 1999) Goal-setting and proactive use of strategies as logical outcomes of the reflective process are expected to enable learners to attribute success or failure to their own level of effort and strategy use, rather than factors outside their control such as luck or task difficulty.

This ability empowers learners and helps them develop a greater sense of achievement. (Graham, 2004)

Research on Journal Writing as Self-Reflection Medium

Raelin (2002) and Amulia (2004) emphasized the roles of the reflective practices as “the practice of periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning of what has recently transpired to ourselves and to others in our immediate environment” (Raelin, 2002). He presents it as a public and open process by which an individual’s interpretations, evaluation, and assumptions are subjected to the review of others in order to avoid bias and errors in perceptions of reality (Desjarlais, Smith, 2011). Amulya states the purpose of reflection is to learn from experiences. She suggests journaling as a way to think about an experience, as a process.

Marefat (2002) notes that in order to gain insights into language learning studies and to get closer to learner needs, the researcher is required to guide the learners to examine their own behavior, i.e. introspection, or as Walker (2006) puts it, a pedagogic technique which promotes reflection.

As it appears in Park (2003), the learning journals have sufficient potential to assist the introspective examination of their learning behavior process described by Marefat (2002), and increase student interest in and engagement with course material, to encourage and empower students to take more responsibility for their own learning, to be more reflective in their study, and to allow them to have a voice and provide valuable feedback to the teacher.

According to the overview of research on journal writing presented above, it becomes apparent, that written reflection can serve as a beneficial learning tool for gaining reflective experiences (Amulia, 2004) from the students' angle and serve the educators by in that way supporting more efficient pedagogical practices not only in general education, but also in the context of the language classroom.

Conclusions

The main goal of this study was to investigate theoretical background on reflective learning processes. Existing research in the area of self-reflection puts on display of language educators an undeniable and thorough justification for adopting the implementation of the self-reflective practices on a larger scale as suggested via journaling as a written form of the process. In addition, the study legitimized the usage of goal-setting as a reflective tool, that can be potentially linked to student-initiated autonomous classroom practices.

The study is lacking actual proof by active classroom research on the nature of reflective practices and their potential contribution to pedagogical practices, that would be conducted by the author in the future.

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