
ENHANCING LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION– A CASE STUDY OF SEEU

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Abstract

Learning through reflection is one of the most interesting experiences that students might have. It is considered a very good tool for self-assessing learning. It is believed that "teachers who promote reflective classrooms ensure that students are fully engaged in the process of making meaning" (Costa and Kallick, 2008, para.5).

Dewey (1991) was among the first researchers who based his work and research on the positive roles that reflection plays in fostering self-reflection and critical thinking. He has defined it as an active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief. Reflections give students opportunities to think and reflect about their learning and note down the obstacles they might face during this process.

The present study aims to investigate the impact of journal writing in promoting critical-thinking skills, and its impact on enhancing learning. The study uses two instruments, a student reflection journal and an interview. Also, Marzano's New Taxonomy of Educational Objectives developed in 2000 was used in the third phase of the study. This Taxonomy contains Three Systems: the Self-system, the Metacognitive system and the Cognitive system.

The overall study results show that reflection journals help students to become more independent learners, reflect on their learning experiences and identify

the most useful learning strategies. Most importantly, all study participants hold positive attitudes towards reflection and they consider it as a valuable tool which can increase learning.

Keyword: *reflection, University, self-assessment, learning, critical thinking.*

Literature Review

Reflection is a very important part of learning and as Vygotsky stated (1978) it is a process that requires the learner to stop and think and reflect. Therefore, critical thinking is a result of reflection on learning and “developing a meta-awareness by “reflecting on one’s thoughts, feelings and actions” (Taylor, 1992, p. 15). The students need to transform their learning through critical self-reflection (Mezirow, 1990 cited in Colley, Bilics and Lerch, 2012, p.1). It is further stated that “As educators, we chose to introduce the process of reflection into our different academic environments through reflective writing prompts. If a student learns to reflect in a math class, the same set of reflective skills or concepts can be used in language arts”.

Generally, reflective practice is nothing new in education. The concept of reflection is strongly connected to learning theories proposed by Dewey, Kolb, Bloom, etc. Dewey claimed that “Reflective thinking is important not only as a tool for teaching, but also as an aim for education since it enables us to know what we are about when we act” (1995 cited in Kucey and Parsons, 2010, p.13). Additionally, Kolb and Bloom suggested that “reflective observation” is essential to build understanding, and that the kind of learning that leads to synthesis and self-development is distinctly different from the acquisition of the objective, factual content of a course” (cited in Eaton, 1985, p.3). Finally, Gregory, Cameron, and Davies (2000) claim, “when students are involved in self-assessment, they provide themselves with regular and descriptive feedback to guide their learning” (p. 10) and it can “also include communicating and sharing what students know to peers, parents, or teachers. By reflecting on their learning, students deepen their understanding (Chappuis, 2009 cited in Kucey and Parsons, 2010, p.14). Nagamine (2008 cited in Nagamine, 2011, p.17) provides the list of the meaning of reflection:

- “Reflection is teacher’s continuous, deliberate examinations of self, beliefs, attitudes, past and future behaviors in and outside of class, and socio-cultural, historical, and political factors of a schooling context.
- It is a process of teachers’ exploration to gain awareness of and an understanding of teaching beliefs and practices.
- It is an endless, cyclical mental endeavor that necessitates sufficient time

and a supportive environment.

- It is a means for teachers to reach critical awareness so as to face the reality and cope with problems (including unforeseen problems in the future) skillfully.
- It enables teachers to expand their repertoire of strategic options and hence become more flexible, spontaneous practitioners.
- It is a means for teachers to better serve learners”.

Another important component addressed in many studies is self-assessment. “Self-assessment should be planned carefully and many academics are trying to design classroom learning opportunities that reflect the principles of constructivist learning, this principle is frequently ignored in the design and implementation of assessment tasks”(Spiller, 2012, cited in Xhaferi 2015, p.80). However, “Self-assessment is not a process by which students determine their own grades. Although students tend to be quite honest when asked to formatively self-assess, the temptation to inflate a summative self-evaluation is often too great. Self-assessment is not something that happens after an assignment is complete and students are ready to turn it in for a final grade” (Andrade and Brook, 2013, p. 1). Taking this into consideration, teachers should consider the self-assessment to help students evaluate their own work. In the learning and teaching processes, student reflection is believed to be a very important tool in enhancing student learning awareness and encourages responsibility for their own learning.

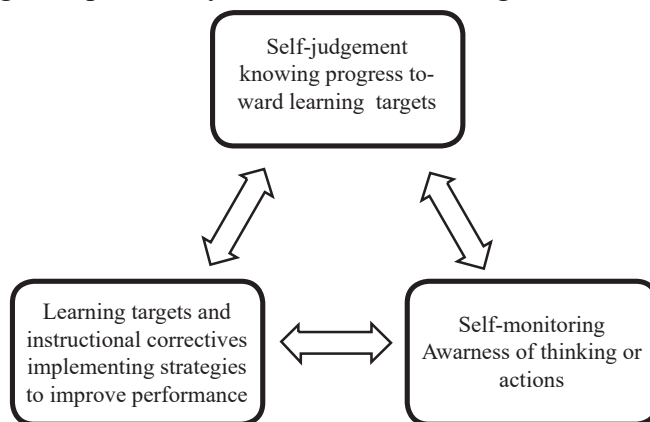


Figure 1: Student Self-Assessment Cycle (Taken from McMillan and Hearn, 2008, p.41)

Self-assessment is a combination of three related components as an ongoing process: self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and identification and implementation of instructional correctives as needed (see Figure 1). Firstly, the

students identify their learning and performance strategies, provide feedback to themselves, and identify the next steps to enhance their performance. Everything is based on high standards and criteria set by themselves.

Implementing self-evaluation in the classroom

Using self-evaluation with the students especially those educated in a teacher-centered classroom is a challenging task for the teachers. Rolheiser (1996 cited in McMillan and Hearn, 2008, pp.46-47) identifies four stages of teaching student self assessment (see Figure 2).

Stage 1 Level of Implementation	Establishing Criteria	Teaching Students How to Apply Criteria	Providing feedback to Students on Application of Criteria	Setting Learning Goals and Strategies
Stage 2 <u>Beginning</u>	Criteria given to students for their reaction	Examples of applying criteria given to students	Teacher provides feedback	Goals and strategies determined by teacher
Stage 3 Intermediate	Students select criteria from a menu of possibilities	Teacher describes how to apply criteria	Feedback provided by both teacher and students	A menu of goals and strategies is provided by the teacher
Stage 4 Full	Students generate criteria	Teacher models how criteria apply	Teacher engages students in justifying their feedback	Student constructs goals and strategies

Table 1: Growth Scheme for Teacher Implementation of Stages of Student Self-Assessment (Taken from Rolheiser, 1996)

Rolheiser's model is a good way to check how often teachers in fact use self-assessment with their students and if any modification is needed to improve the process. Analyzing Rolheiser's scheme, it can be seen that the teacher's role is inevitable in establishing criteria as well and giving feedback. "Feedback is information with which a learner can confirm, add to, overwrite, tune, or restructure information in memory, whether that information is domain knowledge, meta-cognitive knowledge, beliefs about self and tasks, or cognitive tactics and strategies" (Winne and Butler 1994 cited in Hattie & Timperley, 2011, p.82).

Critical thinking is strongly connected to reflection practice. As a concept it has its roots in the 20th century. Due to the complexity of the modern world and its great requirements, critical thinking is becoming very important nowadays. Learners need to develop skills and strategies which will help them act in complex situations required at different work places. Using reflective thinking learners can relate their previous knowledge to new information and

can apply different learning strategies to complete different tasks. There are multiple definitions of the concept but it is reasonable to say that it is a process which enables learners to develop their mental and meta-cognitive skills.

Beyer (1985) and Smith (1990) cited in Martinez and Nino (2013, p.147) are of the opinion that “it entails the ability to gather, evaluate and use information effectively. It also involves thinking skills such as understanding, evaluation and different points of view, judging, posing and solving problems”. They suggest that tasks are one of the classroom activities that can develop students’ critical thinking skills. Similarly, Scriven and Paul (1987) define it as “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action”(para, 1). Paul and Nosich (1993) provided a framework for critical thinking initiatives. According to them, critical thinking is a very important process and it should be infused in all courses. What is more important, it should be developed and reinforced in student learning across the curriculum.

Recent studies

Many studies were conducted in this field. One of them was conducted by Xhaferi (2015) with the students of the Department of English Language and Literature, SEEU. There were 65 participants involved in this study, second and third-year students of the Department of English Language. Data collection methods used were a student questionnaire and student interviews. Results of the data analysis showed that students have positive attitudes towards self-assessment because it increases student motivation for learning. Most importantly, students reported that it improves their critical thinking skills. The students had experiences with self-assessment in the classroom and usually teachers develop criteria for self-assessment in the classroom. Teachers provided feedback most of the time.

Another study was conducted by Khonbi and Sadeghi in 2013 at Urmia University and Tabriz Islamic Azad University, in Iran. The main aim of this study was the investigation a cohort of male and female undergraduate EFL students’ attitudes towards self-assessment. The study used a student’s questionnaire and also a pre- and post-test to identify these issues. The results of the study showed that students have positive attitudes towards self-assessment but the most challenging thing for them was evaluation of their own work and rubrics used.

Finally, another study was conducted in the Czech Republic with six native-speaker trainees on a 4-week TEFL course. The participants of the study were recorded in their post-lesson feedback conferences and evidence of reflection was noted. Then the aim was to identify the reflections with their overall course performance. The study found that those who openly reflected on their lessons tended to be those who performed at the highest level on the course, however, no significant relationship between reflection alone and improvement was found. The study suggests that deeper and more genuine reflection seemed to be the most likely cause of improvement on the course and since reflection is an important factor in initial teacher training it should be perhaps integrated into these courses differently. A study recommends that video recorded observations and reflective journals can be considered as a way to deepen the reflection.

Research methodology

The present study investigates the role of reflection on developing learners' critical-thinking skills. The particular research techniques used in this study were student journal writing and interviews. Additionally, Morzano's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives was used to analyze student critical thinking skills. According to Genesee and Upshur (1996) a reflective journal is a very useful tool to collect information for evaluative purposes, including self- assessment.

Research questions

- Is a reflective journal helpful in promoting critical-thinking skills in students?
- Can a reflection journal help students to use more learning strategies and thus enhance learning?
- What are student perceptions towards self-assessment?

Instruments

The study uses three different instruments: student reflection journals in order to find out learners' challenges in classes. During the research, the students were taking the course English Language Teaching Methodology in the fourth semester. Writing a reflection journal was one of the course requirements and it was worth 20% of the final grades. The students were first introduced with the importance of reflection in the classroom and were also provided with a sample of a reflection paper.

The second research instrument used was a student interview which aimed to find out learner perceptions towards writing a reflection journal. There were 18 students involved in this phase of study. The student interview was modified from Al-Kadri , AlMoamari, Al-Takroni, Roberts, Van der Leuten (2012). It investigated benefits of reflection and self-assessment in learning English as a foreign language.

The third instrument used was A New Taxonomy of Educational Objectives developed by Robert Marzano in 2000. He proposed this taxonomy as a response to the shortcomings of the widely used Bloom's Taxonomy. Marzano's model of thinking skills incorporates a wider range of factors that affect how students think and provides a more research-based theory to help teachers improve their students' thinking. Student reflections were analyzed using the three elements of this taxonomy.

Participants

Participants of the study were 55 English language students in their second year of studies at South East European University in the Academic year 2015-2015. They had different ethnic backgrounds: Albanians, Macedonians and Turks of both genders, male (15) and female (40).

Research Results

Results from reflective journals

Reflective journals are personal records of students' learning experiences. Students were asked to write down their learning difficulties, learning strategies and new things learned. There is evidence that the art of reflection can help boost students' critical thinking skills, encourage students to think about their own thinking (meta-cognition), and help students prepare for assignments and examinations (Homik, M. & Melis, E., 2007; Johnson, S., n.d.; RMIT, 2006 cited in http://www.niu.edu/facdev/_pdf/guide/assessment/reflective_journals%20and_learning_logs.pdf) There were 5 participants randomly selected from the total sample of 55 involved in this phase of the study. They were asked to write reflection journals as part of the course. Some of the questions that served as a guide to write a reflection paper were:

- Describe the events and experiences while learning?
- Evaluate the events from your perspective ?
- How do new things relate to things that you knew?
- Reveal your new insights, connections with other learning, your hypotheses,

and your conclusions?

- Reflect on how this information will be useful to you – What questions do I have? Have I changed how I think about the situation? Where do I go from here?

The following are some excerpts taken from students' writing:

Journal entry, sample 1: *I am impressed how many learning theories there are, and this course has opened my eyes to new ways of learning a foreign language. I now have gained new knowledge about learning and I can see that it is a complex process.*

Journal entry, sample 2: *I this class I learned the definition of a learning strategy, it is surprising that I use some learning strategies but there are so many new ones, for example the Key Word Method. I will definitely start using it.*

Journal entry, sample 3: *The past week has been challenging due to a new course that we will have this semester. I had the feeling that this new assessment tool, reflection paper, will help me overcome some difficulties that I have because the teacher will read them and will understand learning problems that we have.*

Journal entry, sample 4: *Finally, there is a chance for me to reflect on my own learning and write down the most important things that we face in the class. I think that the teacher has chosen a good way even for us who are shy to express ourselves. I was impressed to learn about reading strategies, skimming and scanning. I think that they might be very useful while reading in English.*

Journal entry, sample 5: *After several classes, I am now able to find meanings of some concepts and make connections with new information. I believe that the field of teaching is much wider that we have ever thought. I can now analyze the classes better now and I am able to select which strategies to use when learning grammar.*

Based on the journal entries, it can be concluded that students are excited about writing a reflection journal and talking about their experiences, as well as skills and strategies used for learning about different course topics.

Results of the student interviews

The second method used was the student interview and it aimed to investigate the benefits of reflection in the classroom. There were 10 respondents included in this phase; the sample was drawn from the total number of participants. The

interview contained ten questions. All interviews were conducted individually at the Language Center of SEEU.

R=Researcher

P=Participant

Q1: What is your opinion of the value of reflection? Why?

P2: Reflection is a valuable tool for identifying the present state of knowledge gained in a particular course and its progress. It is of a crucial value for the student because it examines the success of the learning strategies the student has been using, and it helps him/her to decide on possible improvements.

P6: Reflection includes: values, interests, skills and it promotes our critical thinking-skills.

P8: It helps students to become more self-independent, because they take their own responsibilities about their academic performance.

Q3: Does a reflection journal enhance critical-thinking skills?

P2: Yes, it does because I reflect on my learning difficulties and I try to find different ways of how to solve them.

P3: It helps a lot, because I become more self-critical when I write a journal entry.

Q5: What are the learning opportunities/benefits obtained from practicing reflection? Why?

P1: It helps students to start examining the interests, strengths and traits as well as asking ourselves these questions such as: What do I do well?, what do I enjoy doing?, what do others tell me about myself?, what energizes me?, what am I passionate about? All of these questions and interests help us to identify our own strengths, knowing who we are, what we can offer, and where we are going too.

P4: This process helps the students to see the bigger picture about their capacity vs. their accomplishments. It is often the case where the student, only after assessing himself/herself, recognizes and accepts his/her mistakes which then leads to increased motivation and a more productive attitude.

P9: The benefits that you get from writing a reflection paper are: our own personal attributes where each of us has unique thoughts, feelings,

and behaviors. Through these personal attributes, we discovered if we are strong-willed, practical or easy going. Another benefit that we get from self assessment is our own values mainly work values. If we do not value what we do every day, it is unlikely that we will be happy. So, it is important not only to identify our own values, but also to prioritize them, since the satisfaction is the core step for our successful career.

Q9: How do you think you can benefit from your self-assessment? Why?

P1: You can find out your own strengths and weaknesses depending on the skill that you are working on; you become an independent learner and a more critical learner.

P3: I can benefit my career from every step that I undertake, but mostly, I can improve if I evaluate/assess my actions properly, and this can be achieved through reflection.

P7: Reflection helps me examine my experiences. By assessing myself both as a learner and a teacher, I clearly see unintended oversights which I can later on correct and/or eliminate. By examining my experiences I can avoid future oversights from happening and foresee new and unexpected problems which can be prevented.

P10: It is beneficial because it will help us correct our own mistakes and we will not repeat them in the future. From the interview results, it can be concluded that the use of self-assessment has many benefits in the classroom and the most mentioned ones are: identifying the present state of knowledge gained in a particular course and its progress, it helps students to become more self-independent, because they take their own responsibilities about their academic performance, My self-assessment helps me examine my experiences. By assessing myself both as a learner and a teacher, I clearly see unintended oversights which I can later on correct and/or eliminate and this process helps students to correct their own mistakes and they will not repeat them in the future.

From the interview results, it can be concluded that the use of reflection papers in the classroom has many benefits. The students hold a positive attitude towards self-assessment and reflections. By using these tools in learning they are able to identify the present state of knowledge gained in a particular course and they can become more self-independent, because they take their own responsibilities about their academic performance. It is also very useful in developing student critical-thinking skills.

Results obtained from Morzano's Taxonomy

Morzano's Taxonomy is used as a tool to understand the changes in student thinking due to reflection writing. Three examples presented were taken from student reflection papers which dealt with the self, metacognitive and cognitive domains.

The self-system is attitudes, beliefs, and emotions. It motivates the student to the task of learning.

- Example 1: *The course English Language Teaching Methodology has opened my eyes to new ways of learning a foreign language. I now have gained new knowledge about learning and I can see that it is a complex process.*
- Participant 1 has identified the importance of the course English Language Teaching Methodology because she will become an ELT teacher. Through reflection, the participant believes that new knowledge gained in this course made her realize how complex is learning a foreign language.

Metacognition includes monitoring, evaluating, and regulating one's way of thinking. In learning, metacognition is used to set goals and to monitor one's progress in meeting those goals.

- Example 2: *After several classes, I am now able to find meanings of some concepts and make connections with new information. I believe that the field of teaching is much wider than we have ever thought. I can now analyze the classes better now and I am able to select which strategies to use when learning grammar.*
- Participant 2 has successfully monitored himself through several classes and he was able to find meanings of some concepts and make connection with new information learned. He has progressed in using different learning strategies which can be used to learn the grammar of English.

The cognitive system included basic retrieval, comprehension, analysis, and utilization of knowledge.

- Example 3: *In this class I learned the definition of a learning strategy, it is surprising that I use some learning strategies but there are so many new ones, for example the Key Word Method. I will definitely start using it.*
- Participant 3 reported that he comprehends the concept of a learning strategy. He gives an example of the Key Word Method, a strategy for learning new words of English. He plans to use this strategy in the future.

Conclusion

The results of this study lead one to conclude that reflection is one of the most useful tools that can be used to enhance learning and promote critical thinking skills in students. It is shown that students have positive attitudes towards writing a reflection journal but they need some initial training how to do it properly. It seems that that was a very good opportunity for the students to reflect on their learning experiences, skills and different learning strategies that they use and might use in the future. It was also stated that it is a very good tool to be used in a course.

Additionally, the results obtained from the interviews showed that reflection writing has several benefits in the classroom in terms of identifying the present state of knowledge gained in a particular course and help them become more self-independent learners. Interview results showed that the reflection was perceived as being a very beneficial tool for the participants in terms of identifying ones strengths and weaknesses (P3), or to improve and evaluate actions properly. Additionally, it was also reported that the reflection is also beneficial to examine students' experiences and assess himself (P7). Most importantly, it is beneficial because it will help us correct our own mistakes and we will not repeat them in the future (P10).

Finally, Morzano's Taxonomy showed that while writing a reflection students were able to express their attitudes, beliefs, and emotions about learning. Also, they could monitor and evaluate their progress throughout a course and comprehend, analyze and utilize new knowledge as it was presented above. This was shown in the second interview, where the participant stated that *"After several classes, I am now able to find meanings of some concepts and make connections with new information"*. It is evident that the reflection helped this student to monitor and evaluate his own learning. Or, in example 3 *"I use some learning strategies but there are so many new ones, for example the Key Word Method"*, which shows that the student analyzed the use of his own learning strategies.

All in all, this study showed some interesting results on using a reflection paper as a self-assessment tool for learning EFL at a University level. We strongly believe that the results of the study will serve other educators and raise their awareness about its importance in education.

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Appendix 1

Questions to facilitate journal writing in the class
Consider the following when writing a reflective journal:
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Describe the events and your experience – What did I do/hear/see? 2. Interpret and evaluate the events from your perspective – What do I think about it now? How does it relate to other things that I know? 3. Explain your experience; reveal your new insights, connections with other learning, your hypotheses, and your conclusions. 4. Reflect on how this information will be useful to you – What questions do I have? Have I changed how I think about the situation? Where do I go from here?

Appendix 2

Interview questions

1. What is your opinion on the value of reflection journal? Why?
2. Does reflection journal promote critical thinking skills? How?
3. How often should teachers use reflection journal? Why?
4. Have you ever practiced reflection journal in the classroom?
5. What are the learning opportunities/benefits obtained from practicing reflection journal? Why?
6. What are the personal uncertainties that can be sorted out by practicing reflection writing? Why?
7. What do you think of having reflection paper implemented as a major assessment tool? Why?
8. How do you think you can improve using a reflection journal? Why?
9. How do you think you can benefit from your reflection? Why?
10. Do you think students need initial training on writing a reflection journal? Why or why not?

Appendix 3

Morzano's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (2000) The Three Systems and Knowledge

Metacognitive System

- Specifying Learning Goals
- Monitoring the Execution of Knowledge
- Monitoring Clarity
- Monitoring Accuracy

Cognitive System

- Knowledge Retrieval (Recall Execution)
- Comprehension (Synthesis Representation)
- Analysis (Matching, Classifying Error, Analysis, Generalizing and Specifying)
- Knowledge Utilization (Decision Making, Problem Solving, Experimental Inquiry and Investigation)

Knowledge Domain

- Information
- Mental Procedures
- Physical Procedures