Sharing reflections: Enhancing learners' experiences of self-directed learning

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Written reflection has long been seen as an important part of the learning process, particularly in teacher education, but increasingly in language learning contexts too. It can be a valuable tool to encourage critical thinking and develop learners' awareness and control of cognitive strategies for learning (McCrindle & Christensen, 1995). Such reflection often forms part of a two-way dialogue between trainer and trainee or teacher and student. In the Self Access Learning Centre (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies, reflection is an integral part of the independent study modules offered to students, and the learner's written dialogue with the learning advisor forms the backbone of their relationship. This paper looks at the way this interaction can be further enhanced by sharing students' reflections with each other, resulting in a greater understanding of module content, new ideas, enhanced motivation, and a feeling of group cohesion.

内省（リフレクション）を書くことは、教員育成において重要な学習プロセスとされてきたが、学習者の批判的思考能力を養い、学習認知方略の意識と使い方を高めるための有益な手段として、語学学習においてもその重要性を増々強めている（McCrindle and Christensen, 1995）。リフレクションは、指導者と研修員、あるいは先生と学生の双方向での対話を構成する一要素となり得る。神田外語大学 セルフ アクセス ラーニング センターでは、内省は自立学習モジュールの不可欠な要素となっており、学習者とアドバイザーの対話を文書化したものは、二者の関係の根幹を成している。本論文では、生徒が互いに自らの内省を共有し合うことによって指導者・学習者の交流がさらに深まり、モジュールについてより理解し、新しいアイデアや高いモチベーション、集団の結束などにつながっていくということについて検証する。

WRITTEN REFLECTION, often in the form of a learning journal, has been a popular tool for several decades now, and is seen to encourage critical thinking and enhance learning experiences in a number of fields, particularly health sciences and teacher education. It is also being increasingly used in language learning contexts, with some teachers asking learners to record their feelings on tasks and projects in the second language (L2) (Rodgers, 2002). Writing reflections in an L2 can be a difficult task, which requires teacher support to be truly successful. This paper examines the benefits of written reflection and describes the challenges facing learning advisors, working in a self-access centre, who offer independent study modules in which written L2 reflection is the main form of communication between learners and advisors. Research into a possible solution to some of these challenges, namely

the introduction of a forum in which learners can read and comment on each others' reflections, and its effect, is presented and discussed.

Written reflection

Having been first identified and popularized by the philosopher John Dewey (1933, cited in Rodgers, 2002, p. 844) the role of reflection in learning has been well-documented and is now standard practice in many professional training programmes for teachers (Schoen, 1983; Richards & Lockhart, 1994). According to Dewey, reflection is a vital part of education, as it leads the learner to make connections between experiences and analyse them with a view to solving problems (Rodgers, 2002). Writing about teacher education, Richards and Lockhart (1994) see reflection as a prerequisite for professional growth, while Gebhard (1996) characterizes it as the key to self-development. Reflection is now also increasingly employed in tertiary education settings, including second language classrooms, and is seen to have a number of benefits for those who engage in it. McCrindle and Christensen's (1995) study of biology students found that those required to keep reflective learning journals, rather than scientific reports, enhanced their awareness of cognitive learning processes and their metacognitive control over those processes, and also demonstrated increased learning outcomes. Focusing on language learning contexts, Dantas-Whitney (2002) sees reflection as useful in promoting student engagement with learning content by providing opportunities for learners to connect classroom learning to wider contexts. Written reflections in particular, with the distance they offer writers from the events being reflected on, are seen as particularly effective (Luk, 2008), an assertion supported by Berthold, Nueckles and Renkl (2007), who report gains in metacognitive awareness and learner self-assessment through the use of written reflection.

The context

Given the importance of metacognitive awareness and cognitive strategies in language learning (Wenden & Rubin, 1987), and the fact that most teachers experience the benefits of reflection in their own training, it is not surprising that teachers are increasingly choosing to incorporate reflection into their language classrooms. This is also the case at Kanda University of International Studies, where learners taking self-study modules, which are specifically aimed at developing their metacognitive awareness and control over their own learning processes, are required to write reflections on each unit of work they complete. One of these courses, the First Steps Module, is the subject of the current study.

The First Steps Module is a voluntary, one semester freshman module run by learning advisors through the Self Access Learning Centre (SALC). Its aim is to introduce students to the concepts and skills that will help them become good independent language learners. Participants complete one unit a week in their own time, working through activities on topics such as needs analysis, using resources effectively and learning strategies before writing a short reflection (usually 8-15 lines), giving them a chance to demonstrate their level of understanding of the unit's content and apply it to their own learning situation. The reflection that the students write each week is commented on and assessed by the learning advisor, accounting for 20% of the final module grade. Due to the absence of face to face time, these written reflections and the advisor's comments form the backbone of the advisor-learner relationship and provide the advisor with evidence of learning. Interaction is entirely in the learners' L2, English, but language issues, such as grammar and sentence structure, are not considered in awarding final grades.

Limitations of the module

For many learners, this module is the first time they have been expected to reflect on their learning, and certainly the first time that they are asked to do so in their target language. Despite this, the self-study format of the module means that advisors and learners have little opportunity to address exactly what a reflection is and how to write it. Research by Nueckles, Schwonke, Berthold and Renkl (2004) has shown that the mere fact of writing a reflection or learning protocol does not necessarily result in learners using cognitive and metacognitive strategies effectively, and may not have a favourable effect on learning outcomes. It is maybe not surprising, therefore, that the quality of reflection can vary enormously from student to student. Some module-takers demonstrate a good understanding of concepts covered and great insight into their learning process, while others show little comprehension of the content of the module or improvement in their ability to reflect on their learning over the course of the module. As one of the advisors running the module, I was keen to investigate this problem and possible ways to make the module more meaningful for all learners who took it.

Nueckles et al. (2004) promote the use of various cognitive and metacognitive prompts to enhance the reflection and writing process. Bray and Harsch (1996) also found that specific questions resulted in better reflections than merely instructing students to keep a journal of their class activities. While the First Steps Module does use such prompts and specific questions, the feedback learners receive from advisors is predominantly content-oriented and as such doesn't usually focus explicitly on how to write better reflections. If advisors were to correct errors or comment on language issues, it is thought that this may inhibit students from expressing themselves freely in their L2, and could result in learners focusing too much on technical aspects of their writing, rather than their true feelings on the unit they have been studying. Huebner, Nueckles and Renkl (2009)

suggest modelling reflections by providing examples as a way of helping students understand what is required of them. In previous incarnations of the module, example reflections were provided, but it was found that students would often copy them too closely, resulting in a lack of real reflection.

The self-directed study format also results in students having little contact time with the advisor, or with their peers. Sociocultural theories of learning highlight the importance of interaction in learning, and, although students in the SALC do have some limited interaction with advisors through the dialogic written reflections, they are denied opportunities to engage with and learn from each other (Wink & Putney, 2002). Rodgers (2002) sees interaction in a community as an important part of the reflective practice process as it gives value to experiences that a single learner may feel are unimportant, helps one to appreciate experiences from a new angle and can sustain motivation.

Research also shows that more interaction seems to be preferred by learners themselves. Matsumoto (1996), in a study comparing three different modes of reflection and retrospection (diary keeping, questionnaires and interviews) with Japanese university students, found that while the written diary mode was the most popular, students also wanted some kind of forum for sharing their thoughts and strategies with peers. Group interviews, which should have provided this forum, were, however, less popular, as students found it difficult to express their ideas in a focused way, resulting in less opportunity for genuine reflection. As Matsumoto concludes: "It seems likely that a combination of "personal" and "public" retrospection will lead to optimal results" (1996, p.147). Although advisors encourage students to work in groups, many do not and may be losing out on opportunities to discuss the activities from the units and the ideas presented in the module.

The study

Given the importance in the literature of the role of training in reflection writing and peer interaction, both of which were absent from the First Steps Module, I thought that finding a way to incorporate these aspects could enhance learners' reflections and their experiences with the module.

My inspiration for a possible enhancement to the written reflection part of the First Steps Module came from a recent presentation by Sakaguchi (2009), which highlighted how sharing students' reflections on class activities benefitted a class in a number of ways, mainly by enhancing motivation and group cohesion, and helping to solve classroom management issues. By adopting a similar approach for the module, sharing actual student examples of the previous unit's reflections with my group of students the following week, students would have an opportunity to read and comment on each others' reflections. This could be a good way to provide the combination of personal and public reflection that Matsumoto's (1996) students wanted and may prove beneficial for module-takers by potentially increasing their understanding of the content covered, helping them write better reflections and increasing their motivation.

In preparing to investigate the impact of sharing reflections, I decided upon the following research questions:

- Do students read others' reflections?
- To what extent are the shared reflections perceived as useful?
- What impact, if any, does sharing students' First Steps' reflections have on students' ability to understand module content and write reflections?

Data collection

Having obtained student permission to reproduce their comments, records were made of typical, high quality or interesting reflections each week and a sheet of some of these comments was attached to the back of that week's unit along with a space for students to comment (see Appendix for an example.) Over the course of the semester any comments that the students made in reaction to the shared reflections (hereafter referred to as *module comments*) were recorded, and common patterns in the comments that might show evidence of any of the advantages hypothesized or other unpredicted influences that the reflections may have had on how students approached and understood the module, were identified.

In order to elicit more explicit opinions of the shared reflections, several items were included on the end of the existing questionnaire given at the end of the module (hereafter *questionnaire comments*), in order to find out whether students read these reflections and in what ways they found them useful or otherwise. These comments were also analyzed. Module comments were all in English, whereas in the questionnaire students were given the option to write in their L1, Japanese, which some students chose to do. All comments reproduced below are quoted in the original first, with an English translation in parentheses if originally made in Japanese.

Findings

How many students read the shared reflections page?

As the module questionnaire was a voluntary one, only 15 of the 37 students who completed the module answered it in full, so it is impossible to know exactly how many students actually read the reflections each week. Of the 15 students who did respond

to the questionnaire, 10 replied that they always or usually read the shared reflections page, a further four reporting that they sometimes read it, and only one saying they never read it.

Further evidence of students engaging with the shared reflections can be found in the comments made on the shared reflections page each week. Over the course of the module, 13 students commented on the shared reflections, 11 of them more than four times (out of seven units). From the student ID numbers provided on the questionnaire, I was able to establish that six of those students were the same students who answered the questionnaire. From this, I was able to determine that, in all, 21 students (57% of the group) can be said to have read the reflections either sometimes, usually or every week. However, it is also likely that there are some students who read, but did not make comments or complete the final questionnaire, so the actual number of students who read the reflections, at least occasionally, is likely to be higher than this figure suggests.

Were the shared reflections perceived as useful and in what ways?

In order to determine in what ways students found the shared reflections page useful, I examined both the free module comments for evidence of how students were reacting to their peers' reflections, and included an explicit, open-ended question about how the page had been useful, or otherwise, on the final questionnaire.

In total, 45 comments were made by 13 students on the shared reflections page during the module. These module comments were coded according to my research questions and insights from the literature and four categories (shown in Table 1) were extrapolated from the data. When asked more explicitly to comment on the usefulness of the shared reflections in the final questionnaire, the same categories emerged. The categories, numbers of comments made and examples can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Comments by category

Category 1: Reading the reflections clarified my **understanding of module content**	
No. of module comments: 17	No. of questionnaire comments: 7
Example module comment: *I think we need to choose the best area which matches our small goals and big goals. For me, I realized that I should use the grammar worksheets (about daily conversation)*	Example questionnaire comment: "いろいろな意見を知って自分の視野が広がった。(I could find out what other people thought and this broadened my own way of thinking.)"

Category 2: I gained some **new study strategies** and new ideas from reading these reflections	
No. of module comments: 17	No. of questionnaire comments: 4
Example module comment: *This is a nice idea for me. It's very important to organize my weekly schedule on the first day in a week.*	Example questionnaire comment: "ほかの人の意見や勉強方法を知ることで、自分では発見できなかった新たなことがわかったから。(I could know other people's ideas and ways of studying, and I could learn new things that I hadn't discovered on my own.)"

Category 3: Reading the reflections enhanced my **motivation**	
No. of module comments: 10	No. of questionnaire comments: 4
Example module comment: *I felt relief at these comments. Everyone does their best so I also want to do my best for my future*	Example questionnaire comment: "同じことで悩んでいることがわかり、もっとがんばろうという気になれた。(I understood that others had the same kind of worries as me, and that gave me more motivation to see it through.)"
Category 4: Reading the reflections helped me feel a **group identity** with other students	
No. of module comments: 5	No. of questionnaire comments: 4
Example module comment: *I agree with her and have same experience with her. I want to do review properly.*	Example questionnaire comment: "共感することができ、がんばれた。(I felt a common feeling with others and was able to try hard.)"

In relation to categories 3 and 4, motivation and group cohesion, the questionnaire comments from Table 1 highlighted the close relationship between these two aspects, with students characterizing motivation as being enhanced by the sense of group identity which had been engendered by the shared reflections.

Only two negative comments were made about the usefulness of being able to read others' reflections, both of which mentioned that the shared reflections page often included many of the same opinions and was therefore boring to read. No students explicitly commented on the influence reading the reflections had had on their own ability to write reflections.

What impact, if any, does sharing students' First Steps' reflections have on students' ability to understand module content and write reflections?

While the comments above show that students felt that reading the shared reflections helped them to understand the course content, it is difficult to judge this empirically. For more objective data, I consulted the module grades. Grading reflections is a controversial area, and when grading reflections written in an L2, teachers and advisors must try to separate the content, which is evidence of students' thinking, from the often unclear language used to express it (Luk, 2008). Nevertheless, I felt that these grades could provide some insight into the students' experience taking the module. Students were graded out of five points on three areas: the quality of their reflections, their work on the module activities, which usually indicates how well they have understood the concepts introduced, and the final learning plan project. The mean average grades and numbers of higher grades (4 or 5) awarded to the students who regularly read or commented on the reflections were examined, and compared to those for students who showed no explicit interest in the shared reflections, and with the whole group average. Results are shown in Table 2.

As some students whose grades have been included in the non-reflection-readers group may indeed have actually been reading them, these results are not completely reliable, but, as Table 2 demonstrates, the average grade for students claiming to be regular reflection readers is higher in every category, by 0.3

Table 2. Module grades

	Reflections		Module activities		Final learning plan	
	Mean grade	No. of 4 or 5s awarded	Mean grade	No. of 4 or 5s awarded	Mean grade	No. of 4 or 5s awarded
Students known to be regular reflection readers (21)	3.5	16/21 (76%)	3.9	15/21 (71%)	3.4	10/21 (48%)
Students giving no evidence of reading reflections regularly (16)	3.2	6/16 (38%)	3.6	10/16(62%)	2.9	4/16 (25%)
Whole group average (37)	3.4	22/37 (59%)	3.7	25/37 (68%)	3.2	14/37 (38%)

- 0.5, than for those who did not show evidence of reading the shared reflections, and is also marginally higher than the group average. The number of higher grades awarded (4 or 5) is also significantly and consistently higher in the reflection readers' group, especially regarding reflections made each week.

While it must be emphasized that the grades achieved by students may have been influenced by many aspects other than the shared reflections, such as their English proficiency level and overall motivation, these results nevertheless show a positive correlation between a willingness to engage with other students' comments and the degree to which students were able to understand, reflect on and apply concepts introduced in the module, and write their reflections.

Discussion

Due to the voluntary nature of the end of module questionnaire, it has been impossible to find out exactly how many students read the shared reflections and what they thought of them. As such, these results are inconclusive, but both the module comments and the questionnaire comments are overwhelmingly positive. The fact that students were willing to spend time reading their peers' ideas and feelings towards the module demonstrates that they were engaging more deeply and personally with the content, and the comments contain several instances of students regarding the work they had done from slightly different perspectives and sometimes even rethinking or reaffirming their previous ideas, as the following example shows:

"I think this idea (make a rival) is good. I will study hard more not to lose to my friends. But too much considering opponent is not good. Sometimes I compare with my friends and sometimes I do in my speed. That's the my way."

In this case, the student has gained a new idea from reading a classmate's reflection, but has decided to adapt it slightly for

her own situation and personality. This inner dialogue can only enhance the learning process and support the work that learning advisors do in their own comments to students, as seen in a further example:

Student A's original reflection:

"I learned you should not compare your English with other people. You are you. They are different. We shouldn't be afraid to speak in Freshman English class."

Student B's comment:

"I can't speak English fluently and my pronunciation is bad, so I worried what classmate think about my English skill. But I read this comment, I felt I should have change my mind."

In this case, the advisor's original comment to student B, which had urged this learner not to worry about other students' opinions of her, was reinforced by the shared reflection that student A wrote, and seems to have been taken to heart.

One major limitation of this study is its failure to determine qualitatively the degree to which reading others' reflections may have affected learners' own abilities to write reflections. In order to do this, future studies are necessary. Such a study could first determine the qualities of a "good" reflection, and then, in addition to comparing students' grades, conduct a careful, qualitative examination and comparison of the actual reflections made at the beginning and nearer the end of the module by readers and non-readers of the reflections to determine if and what kind of improvements were evident in each group.

Conclusion

In its role as an independent study module, the First Steps Module can help students to acquire the skills to become better independent learners, but the medium of instruction presents challenges to advisors who want to ensure that students get the most out of the module. By sharing students' reflections with the group, learners are exposed to examples of good or insightful comments and can gain new perspectives on the material covered and feel a sense of group cohesion that may otherwise be lacking, enriching their experiences of independent learning.

Bio data

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Appendix

An example of a shared reflections page from the First Steps Module

Unit 4 - Reflections from other students:

Here are some of the things that students wrote about in this week's unit:

What did you find out about your motivation, confidence and anxiety? How can you use this week's strategies to make your study better?

I want to keep my motivation by **discussing what I and others did with my friends.** I think we can reflect on our studies and **encourage each other.**

When I am very tired**, I can use laughing**. My friends are so funny when I was very tired or felt sad. So I can use this week's strategies many times in many place.

I don't have confidence but sometimes I feel confident because when I was in Junior high I couldn't read long English text, but now I can read it.

I think it is good to **make a rival** and compete with each other. I might be able to study hard to overcome my rival!

I came up with some ways of lowering anxiety. For example, I sometimes **try to think that I don't have to study English so hard**. Trying too hard gives me pressure, so it's better to relax.

Don't compare your English with other people. You are you, they are different. We shouldn't be afraid to speak in FE class.

I learned that it is important to control motivation, anxiety and confidence. **Studying efficiency is influenced by my feeling**. Especially I think it is good for me to use music.

I didn't think the confidence building diary was a good idea, but I found that it's a good thing **to keep a diary of studying English.** After a few days, reviewing the diary reminds me of how much my motivation was towards English.

Your comments:

Please feel free to write about anything that you have read from other students.