

Reflective practices in the foreign language classroom

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Reflection is the practice of thinking analytically about one's experiences and activities. This paper describes how reflective activities have been incorporated into junior high school, high school, university, and pre-service English teacher education classes. As part of the goal of learning activities in these classes, students were asked to critically reflect upon their experiences and activities. As a result, students appeared to have improved their language skills and more importantly, they gained experience in self-regulating their learning. Three factors deemed necessary for effective reflective practice are also discussed: opportunities for student choice and initiative, manageable yet challenging tasks, and supportive and sharing classroom relationships. This paper also argues that student reflection has a great influence on teacher reflection and may help to motivate teachers to incorporate changes in their teaching approaches.

リフレクション（内省）とは自己の経験や活動を分析する思考である。英語の授業で、中学生・高校生・大学生・教育実習生のリフレクションを引き出す指導はどうあるべきかを示すことが本研究の目的である。毎回の授業のタスクのひとつとして、生徒や学生は授業をクリティカルに振り返り、自分の学習を分析した。その結果、生徒や学生は語学スキルを伸ばし、学習に対する自己調整力を向上させることができるようになったようだ。効果的なリフレクションを可能にする要素は3つある。それは第一に、生徒・学生が何をどう学ぶかを自ら決定できる機会をできる限り与えること、第二に、一見できそうに見えるが、実際は努力がなければなかなか達成できないタスクに取り組ませること、第三に、お互いを尊敬し、お互いの内省をシェアできるようなクラスの雰囲気を作教師が作り出すことである。また本研究は生徒や学生の内省が教師の内省に大きな影響を与え、教師の指導法に変化をもたらすこともわかった。

THE AIM of reflective practices in the foreign language classroom is to help students understand the learning process and become autonomous learners. This paper describes the reflective activities we incorporated into our secondary and post-secondary English as a foreign language (EFL) classes and pre-service English teacher education classes wherein students were given opportunities to think analytically about their learning experiences in the classroom. Students were told that the goal of the class was to critically reflect upon their performance and become aware of their strengths and weaknesses as language learners.

We begin with a brief explanation of the theoretical perspective we take in our teaching and why we advocate the use of reflective practices, then go on to a discussion of the reflection process. Next, we describe some of the practices we undertook in our classrooms and propose three factors which we believe are necessary for reflective practices to be successful. Finally, we



discuss the role of the teacher in reflective practice activities, the assessment of these practices, and the limitations of our paper.

A sociocultural perspective

Our approach to language learning and teaching is framed by sociocultural theory. According to Johnson (2009), human cognition is formed through sociocultural activities. The development of cognition “is characterized as the acquisition and manipulation of cultural tools and knowledge, the most powerful of which is language” (Johnson, 2009, pp. 1-2). Language learning, that is, learning, is thought of as a social practice and the classroom is a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Students in the classroom community are involved in the construction of identities; they are involved in understanding their relationships with others and imagining future relationships (Norton, 2000, p. 5). As teachers, we believe that imagination is a crucial aspect in learning. As Wenger (1998) says, “Students must be able to explore who they are, who they are not, who they could be. They must be able to understand where they come from and where they can go” (p. 272). The incorporation in the classroom of activities designed to encourage reflective practices may help students in their language learning endeavors.

Research by Nakane (2007) has described the discourse of Japanese classrooms as reflecting positivistic educational principles which advance objective knowledge and teacher-centered pedagogy. Nakane argues that under such norms, student views and opinions are deemed irrelevant and that the discourse of classrooms in Japan confines students to being silent and passive learners. The English language learner in Japanese schools has also been characterized as silent and passive (Law, 1995; LoCastro, 1996). One of the most prevalent English language teaching methods in high schools, *yakudoku*, emphasizes meta-linguistic grammatical knowledge and translation (Gorsuch,

1998). In light of these observations, we introduced reflective practices into our classrooms in order to help students take and gain control of their learning.

The reflection process

Reflection is the practice of thinking analytically about one’s experiences and behavior. Reflective practice can be “thought of as asking searching questions about experience and conceptualized as both a state of mind and an on-going type of behavior” (Dymoke & Harrison, 2008, p. 8). We ask our students to think analytically about their experiences as they proceed through their lessons, as part of the goal of each class is for students to critically reflect upon their performance. This critical reflection helps students think about their strengths and weaknesses with a view to making a plan for future action (Harmer, 2001). The reflection process may encourage students to start challenging their assumptions about language learning and teaching.

Reflective practices in the classroom

In this section, we share the reflective practices we have introduced into our classroom activities at the secondary and post-secondary levels.

Junior high school classes

In a second-year junior high school EFL class, students were asked to rate and comment on, in either Japanese or English, their classroom activities in terms of “interestingness” and “usefulness” at the end of each lesson (Woo & Murphey, 1999, p. 15). Students were given about five or six minutes to write their comments and rate their exercises on a scale of 1 to 5. The exercises included having short chats with one another and telling each other short stories. Students wrote their comments

and ratings in their notebooks which their teacher, one of the authors, collected at the end of the class and returned in the next class with her feedback. The teacher shared students' comments and reflections in the form of bi-weekly class newsletters. The following student comments, which were written in Japanese and translated here into English by the authors, show how students were beginning to notice what they could and could not do and what they wanted to do or would do more of.

Student reflection on short chats:

- *Chat activity was a lot of fun, so I want to practice more.*
- *When my partner asks a question, I should not simply answer the question but I should answer it without pause, add more information, and ask a different question to him or her.*
- *When I talk a lot about my experience or my ideas, the chat activity becomes more interesting and lasts longer.*
- *I was able to use in the chat the grammar (comparatives and superlatives of adjectives) which I learned last week. I'd like to try using present perfect in the next chat.*

Student reflection on short story reading:

- *Reading a funny short story was difficult.*
- *I was able to understand the story only after the teacher explained.*
- *I need to learn more vocabulary to understand English stories.*

As they engaged in reflecting on their short chat activity, students showed through their comments that they were able to develop ideas on how to improve their speaking skills such as maintaining the conversation longer, and taking more and longer turns. They recognized the importance of back-channelling and self-disclosure. Students wrote that as they got

used to the reflection activities, they started to enjoy chatting and reading short stories in English and found a sense of purpose in English classes.

The chat exercises were continued for a whole school year and students were also asked to write down what they said during their chats in their notebooks. At the beginning most students were not able to carry on a conversation for more than one minute and the teacher noticed pauses during the chats. However, by the end of the school year, some students were able to keep talking for as long as two minutes. The teacher observed that the amount of utterances and the complexity of sentence structures used in the chat activity also increased.

The teacher gradually ascertained that her students could contribute a lot to her class, that she should or need not be in total control of everything, and that she should try to share control of the lesson with her students. The teacher also realized that tight control of the class might have been the cause of the lack of autonomy she sensed among her students. Thus, students' reflections influenced the teacher's reflections and motivated her to try to change her teaching approaches.

Senior high school classes

In first-year high school EFL classes, the teacher, one of the authors, held discussions on learning strategies (See Appendix 1), and gave reading-aloud assignments which included iPod recordings and a self-assessment worksheet (See Appendix 2). Students were also asked to recite a poem and to complete a self-assessment worksheet after their recitation. The teacher videotaped students' performances which were then uploaded to the school website for later viewing by them. Examples of students' self-assessments on their performance in the reading aloud and recitation exercises are:

- *I didn't know that if I read aloud, I could understand the text better*



and memorize vocabulary better.

- *I also noticed how bad my pronunciation was.*
- *I noticed my poor articulation, bad posture, and unclear voice.*

These comments and reflections show that at least one student perceived that he or she benefited from the reading exercises and that other students believed they understood their weaknesses.

University classes

University students in an English workshop, which met once a week for three periods, began the course and each of three class projects by first discussing their language learning goals and objectives, such as reading at least one book a week or polishing their presentation skills. The projects, which included group or individual PowerPoint or poster presentations, were videotaped. Students were required to view these videos, which were put on Blackboard, the school's learning management system, and to write peer and self-evaluation reports. In the reports, students were asked to reflect upon whether their project goals were reached. Students showed in the reports that they knew what they needed to do for a better performance, and why practicing language in the classroom was important.

- *If you tell information for others, you should know about it sufficiently. And you should tell it easier than you wrote down. In presentation we have to speak loudly and slowly and do eye contact. Eye contact needs practice I think.*
- *My news report goal is to remember what I say and to tell audience easy to understand. I think that I reach a half of my goal. Because I remembered my news report.*
- *This news is very good for us because we should know about any kind of news in my country like this news. I think that we should become to be able to tell news like this to people in other country.*

Teacher education classes

University students in teacher education classes were asked to read a list of beliefs regarding language acquisition and language teaching and to rate the beliefs on a scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 6 (strongly disagree) (See Appendix 3). Students were also asked to keep a teaching journal. Students wrote their reflections on what challenged their beliefs in teaching and learning after each class. They were also asked to write entries in their journals after participating in class observations, conferences, and teacher seminars. Students videotaped their mini-teaching practice lessons and wrote self-assessment reports. Group and individual discussions with their teacher were held regarding the practice lessons and reports. This is teaching as dialogic mediation according to Johnson (2009) – “learners are assisted as they appropriate relevant linguistic and cultural resources and are guided as they use and transform those resources to accomplish certain goals” (p. 63). The samples below of students' journal reflections after watching their mini-teaching practice videos show that they are taking the first step in noticing what they can do and what they are doing.

- *I noticed how I looked and sounded like from the perspective of students.*
- *I noticed my teaching style was different from other students.*
- *I was only explaining the text. I was not really teaching it.*

Three important factors

In our experience with using reflective practices in the classroom, we have found that giving students opportunities to make decisions and take initiative, providing students with manageable yet challenging tasks, and encouraging a supportive and caring environment in the classroom are important factors in the reflection process. For the junior high school students, rating their classroom activities at the end of each class was something most



of them had never done before. As they grew more accustomed to the rating exercises, they were able to become more and more critical of their learning. This reflective practice helped them to see what they had learned in the class and to set goals for the next class. Students were able to decide by themselves what they wanted to try to do next.

The reading aloud activity for the high school students was a manageable yet challenging task. Reading the assigned text aloud and recording it with iPods was not an easy task at first for high school students. They had to practice again and again until they felt satisfied with their performance. Some students said they practiced more than five hours. In the process, they noticed their weaknesses in pronunciation and intonation. They also noticed that reading aloud was an effective learning method for understanding the text.

To have supportive and sharing relationships--relationships in which students can share ideas on how to learn a language--in the classroom is crucial. Working in pairs and groups helped the secondary and post-secondary students relax and enjoy their classroom activities. What they noticed was shared by all students through newsletters or discussions. The comments in their notebooks showed that some of the junior high school students felt proud of themselves when their reflection was mentioned in the class and when the other students wrote they felt they wanted to be like them.

The role of the teacher

Junior and senior high school teachers should give students the chance to make some decisions as they engage in tasks. Too much control by the teacher can be counterproductive. Teachers should let students take control of their learning and give them opportunities to notice their strengths and weaknesses. Engaging in dialogue with students by providing feedback in note-

books and listening to student voices is important. Teachers can make use of technology such as iPods, and school online networks and systems, or class newsletters to share the reflections among students. Teachers should try to match activities to the proficiency levels of students so that they will be manageable yet challenging tasks, and help students feel self-efficacy so that they can discover and develop their learning strategies and set goals. Along with doing the above, teachers in university classes can act mainly as a resource, as "old timers," and provide an adult role model for the students.

In teacher education courses, the teacher educator should try to help student teachers verbalize and think critically about their teaching and learning beliefs and concepts and reconstruct those beliefs. One role of the teacher is to help student teachers understand that teachers need to reflect-in-action (Schön, 1987):

Reflection-in-action is a reflective conversation with the materials of a situation. Each person carries out his own evolving role... 'listens' to the surprises ('back talk') that result from earlier moves, and responds through on-line production of new moves that gives new meanings and directions to the development of the artifact. (p. 31)

Schön (1983, 1987) argues that as a result of reflection-in-action, the practitioner should be able to come up with a set of alternative actions. The teacher practitioner should be able to critically reflect upon her teaching and make changes she deems necessary.

Standardized and institutionalized teacher training programs tend to convey the idea that teaching is to control students. Student teachers need to be engaged in pedagogical dialogue (Little, 1995):

While learning strategies and learner training can play an important supporting role in the development of learner



autonomy, the decisive factor will always be the nature of the pedagogical dialogue; and that since learning arises from interaction and interaction is characterized by interdependence, the development of autonomy in learners presupposes the development of autonomy in teachers. (p. 175)

The teacher educator is involved in dialogic mediation with her students. In teaching as dialogic mediation, students move from everyday concepts “that are acquired both formally and informally as a result of schooling experiences and that form the basis of teachers’ intuitive thinking about teaching” to scientific concepts, “concepts formulated by one’s professional discourse community, defined in formal theories, and acquired through formal instruction” (Johnson, 2009, p. 64). The teacher educator assists in providing such resources and guidance.

Assessment of reflective practices in the classroom

Student reflection helps students change their beliefs about and behavior in language learning and an individual student’s reflections can influence other students. The second-year junior high school students read via the class newsletters about their classmates’ ideas on language use and said they were surprised to know that their peers were able to come up with such good ideas on how to carry on a short chat. This encouraged them to try to develop ways to improve their conversation skills.

Student reflection can also influence the way teachers teach in the language classroom. Teachers should try to listen to students’ voices and assess their reflective practices by observing and videotaping their classes, carefully reading and providing feedback to student reflections and journals, and making student work and reflections public by uploading

videos online and publishing newsletters, so as to create a vital learning community where both students and teachers can and do reflect on their learning and teaching together.

Limitations of the paper

There are at least three limitations we should note. First, the data used in this paper were mainly what students wrote in their notebooks or journals. A teacher-student power relationship always exists in the classroom, and it cannot be denied that some students write to please their teachers. Thus, there may have been more positively focused reflections than negative ones. Second, the three factors that we believe enhance reflective practices may not be unique to classroom reflection activities. These factors may be necessary for any effective learning environment. However, we believe that these factors are still rare in junior and senior high schools where teacher control is so strong that students have almost no chance to voice their feelings and ideas about what and how they learn. Third, the duration of our class observations and data collection was short. The reflection practices by second-year junior high school students and university students lasted an entire school year, while those by high school students were sporadic and those by students in teacher education classes lasted for either only a spring term or a year. Research is needed on reflective practices in classes that span more than one year and across grade levels.

Concluding remarks

We believe how to learn is as important as what to learn. Reflective practices in the classroom help both teachers and students become aware of how to learn and lead to teacher and learner autonomy. We suggest trying reflective practices in every class and grade level. It took only five or six minutes for the junior high school students in this study to write their



reflections, but it appears to have made a huge impact on the way they learn and the way their teacher teaches.

Bio data

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Appendix I

問題の形式	対策
I どこにあったの問題 この文はどのlessonからのもの？	
II どこにあったの問題 この語句は文のどこにあったの？	
III 初見のテキスト 内容・単語の意味・パラグラフの内容 内容・代名詞が指しているもの	
IV&V 単語の穴埋め 文は初見	
VI 初見のテキストのサマリーを書く	



Appendix 2

Self-assessment

自分の発表のビデオを見て気がついたこと:

今後の目標: _____

1. Effort 努力度

1あまり準備しなかった

2一応準備はした

3時間をとってできる限り準備した

2. Accomplishment 完成度

1思うように出来なかった

2思ったように出来た

3自分の予想を超えた出来ばえ

3. Cooperation ペアとのコラボ

1 ペアとはばらばらだった

2 ペアと協力・工夫できた

3 お互いの力が相乗効果を生んだ

4 年 _____ 組 _____ 番氏名 _____ 合計点 _____ 点

Appendix 3

教職アンケート (Lightbown & Spada, 2006)

次は言語学習や言語教育で議論されている事柄です。あなたはどの思いますか。強くそう思う (6), そう思 (5), 少しそう思う (4), あまりそうとは思わない (3), そう思わない (2), 強くそう思い (1) を選んでください。

- 英語は真似てみることで身につく。
- 英語が母語の親は子供が文法を間違って英語を話したりすると訂正する

のが普通だ。

- 知能が高い人は言語に強い。
- 第二言語習得の成功を決めるのは言語を学ぶ動機があるかどうかだ。
- 学校で英語教育を早く始めれば始めるほど、英語習得の成功につながる。
- 英語の間違いは母語である日本語の影響のためである。
- 語彙力をつけるのはリーディングである。
- 英語の個々の発音ができるようにするのは大切だ。
- 英単語1,000語があれば英語母語話者との会話ができる。
- 英語教師は文法を教える際、一度に一つの文法項目を教えるべきだ。
- 英語教師は簡単な文法を教えてから複雑な文法を教えるべきだ。
- 生徒の英語の間違いはすぐに訂正しないと悪い癖になってしまう。
- 英語教師はまだ習っていない文法を含むような教材を使ってはいけない。
- 生徒はグループで活動すると間違った英語を身につけてしまう。
- 生徒は教師が教えたことを習得する。
- 英語教師は生徒の間違いを明確に指摘するよりも、正しい英語で言い直し方がよい。
- 生徒は英語で歴史とか理科を学ぶとその内容のみならず、英語も同時に学ぶことができる。

