

The Use of Online Self-Reflection to Teach Writing: The Case of Second Year ENSC Students

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Abstract

The introduction of online learning in the last two years offered learners the chance to develop their autonomy and compelled teachers to offer self-study activities that develop learners' metacognition. One practice that allows students to take ownership of their learning is reflective writing. A sample of 27 students from the second year class of the Department of English at the ENSC were required to submit via email post-writing reflective journals wherein they describe, analyse, and evaluate their writing experience. This study analyses the content of the students' self-reflection. It seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) To what extent are the students able to verbalize their thoughts about their writing processes and products? (2) How is this online practice beneficial for the students? To answer these questions, the content of the reflective reports has been quantitatively and qualitatively analysed in addition to the teacher's experience and insight from this experience. The results showed that the students generated rich and varied content about their writing and developed their reflective ability throughout the year. It improved their metacognitive knowledge and their self-evaluation skills. Besides, sharing the reflective reports allowed students to feel closer to their teachers which relieved their fear from writing.

Keywords : Metacognition, Online Learning, Reflective Writing, Self-Evaluation, Writing Process

Introduction

Algeria witnessed in the recent years technical advances that highly impacted the conventional educational practices. The major positive outcome of blended learning is that it boosted learner autonomy, and it allowed more time for deeper self-study online activities under the guidance of the instructor. One of these practices is the use of journaling or reflective writing. The latter has shown numerous benefits in a considerable number of studies (Wärnsby et al., 2021; Ningrum, 2020; Hussein, 2018, Ghaouar, 2012; Cavilla, 2017; Chang, 2019). Reflective learning consists in referring back to a previous experience and thinking deeply about its process and result. It is a multi-dimensional approach that covers the intellectual, metacognitive and the socio-affective aspects of education (Farrel, 2004). The purpose of this study is to find out the extent to which second year ENSC students can observe their own writing experience in a multimedia environment and report an account of their thoughts, emotions, and writing habits.

1. Reflective Learning

Research dealing with the development of learners' awareness and control of their mental processes includes several related concepts such as, critical thinking, self-regulated learning, metacognition, and reflective learning. The word 'reflection' finds its roots in the Latin 'reflectere' which means 'bending back' in the same way a mirror reflects back one's image (Reed et al., 1995). In other words, pausing and reflecting on a learning experience allows the learner to look inward and consider the material, the steps, and the methods used from a different and more profound perspective. Reflective learning originated from experiential learning and the work of John Dewey who defines 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 further conclusion to which it tends" (Dewey, 1933, p.9)

Reflective practice consists in restructuring one's knowledge and emotions to gain more insight. As explained by Moon (2004), reflection is often 'based on the further processing of knowledge and understanding that we already possess' (p.82). Two reflection types are distinguished in academic settings: reflection with new learning material and reflection without new

learning material (ibid). The former concerns the learner's adjustment of his/her current cognitive structure to the new complex material; it is in other words, a form of deep learning. The latter refers to an internal metacognitive experience wherein the learner re-arranges his/her cognitive structure to adapt to his/her newly developed ideas. In this case, emotion takes a significant part in the reflecting process because the experience is purely internal. The two forms of reflection involve the process of translating knowledge into a represented form. In educational settings, this represented form consists of a written assignment referred to as 'a reflection', or 'a metacognitive reflection. In the case there is no new learning material, it is sometimes referred to as 'a reflective journal'.

In order to clarify the meaning of reflection, Rodgers (2002) extracted from the work of Dewey (1933) four criteria that are necessary to facilitate its teaching and learning. First, reflection relies on making connections between different learning experiences 'it is the thread that makes continuity of learning possible' (Rodgers, 2002, p. 845). Second, it requires the characteristics of scientific enquiry such as rigor and discipline. The third criterion for effective reflection is the necessity to express and share the represented reflection in a supportive community. Rodgers (2002) explains that collaborative reflection; as opposed to an isolated reflection, increases the value of the practice, broadens the picture, and boosts the self-discipline required to reflect. Finally, a set of attitudes are required to guide reflective thinking; the main ones are wholeheartedness, open-mindedness, and responsibility. In other words, being genuinely curious, tolerant, and enthusiastic in exploring one's thoughts is a pre-requisite to enhance personal and intellectual growth.

2-Reflective Writing in the Digital Age

The importance of reflective learning is even more crucial in the digital age. The easy access to unlimited sources of information is a double-edged sword. While the benefits of modern information and communication technology are undeniable, the risk of turning students into passive receptors who over-consume easily attainable data is more present than ever. It is fundamental; in this era in particular, to guide learners in developing metacognitive and critical thinking skills to allow them to question and evaluate both the information they receive and their own learning behaviors and strategy use. This applies for

different subject matters such as linguistics and civilization, but also in the learning of language skills such as writing.

In order to become more competent writers, students must take ownership of their own writing. In addition to the usual writing activities performed in class such as studying model texts, generating ideas, drafting essays, peer-reviewing, and receiving teacher's feedback; extra time is needed to turn the learners' attention to their cognitive processes, writing habits, styles, emotions, strengths, and limits. As noted by Yancey (1998), 'in such describing (process) students continue to develop an authority, an expertise, about their own writing and how it works, when it works as well as about how it doesn't' (Yancey, 1998, p. 28). Blending learning offers the possibility to include such practice in the writing module.

3-Method

The study was conducted in the Department of English of the ENS El katiba Assia Djebbar Constantine in the academic year 2020-2021. A sample of 27 students from the second year class was randomly selected to take part in the experiment of self-reflection in the module of written expression. The study aims at answering the following questions

- 1) To what extent are second year students able to verbalize their thoughts about their writing processes and products?
- 2) How is self-reflection in writing beneficial for the students?

Due to the covid 19 pandemic, the ENSC adopted blended learning by mixing online and traditional in-class sessions. Therefore, writing instruction was organized by tackling theoretical aspects and model essays mostly online, and writing practice was implemented in class to benefit from the teacher's guidance. Reflective practice is performed online by typing the reflection in a word document and sending it via email to the teacher after submitting each writing assignment.

The participants were required to reflect on their writing process and their final writing product. To guide them in their reflection, they were provided with reflective prompts that tackled the different stages of the writing process (planning, drafting, revising, evaluating the final draft). The questions also enquired about learners' emotions, time-management skills, their

rigidity/flexibility while writing...etc. For example, they were required to ask themselves the following questions: ‘How did I feel as I started writing? How did I managed to make it easier?’, Did I follow the plan I settled (if any) at the beginning of my writing? Or did I change the division of paragraphs?, ‘What can I do to make my revision more effective ?’ ‘What are the strengths of my written production? What do I want to change about it ?’

The teacher explained that they had to expand their responses, and not to provide short yes/no answers. Reflecting on their writing is a new and unfamiliar practice for the students; therefore, after two weeks of reflective practice, the teacher printed and distributed anonymous reflective papers and asked the participants in the classroom to assess their depth with the guidance of a peer assessment reflection rubric (Appendix 1). After attributing a score for each assessed reflection, the participants were required to justify their answer. The purpose of this activity is to clarify to students what is expected from them in reflective writing.

4-Results and Discussion

The first objective of this study is to measure the extent to which second year students can reflect on their writing process and product. Therefore, a rubric was adapted from faigely et al. (1985) scale to assess the quality of the participants’ reflective journal. The reflections that were categorized as ‘shallow’ correspond to the brief and superficial responses that display a very limited knowledge of their writing strategies, habits, and feelings. The ‘medium’ classification concerns answers that merely describe writing strategies that could fit with any other assignment. The reflections categorized as ‘deep’ include more complex and rich reflections that detail the specific processes, challenges, and strategies experienced for the particular writing task at hand. Examples of the students’ answers are displayed in the following table:

Table 1 : Examples of Students' Reflections

	Shallow	Medium	Deep
Planning	<i>I did not follow any strategy, I just wrote the necessary points and started to develop them</i>	<i>I started by writing random ideas or anything that came to my mind then i made an outline . I often use this strategy not always. I encountered many difficulties before I started writing. I felt very confused about the point i should talk about . Once i applied the strategy it made it easier for me . I set my goal and points i should focus on while i started drafting</i>	<i>I was so afraid from writing an essay and developing an idea in 5 paragraphs .I did not feel at all able to write more than one paragraph , i feel like i do not have enough ideas. At first , using examples seems easy but choosing the appropriate example and including it appropriately to the essay is complicated. My apprehensions were about finding ideas , choosing the appropriate examples and the most important was developing points different from each other in the body paragraphs</i>
Drafting	<i>I started with the introduction in a rough paper, then wrote my thesis then I moved to supporting details for my main ideas of the three body paragraphs.</i>	<i>I found difficulties in developing my ideas because they were too general, I could not find the appropriate examples to use.</i>	<i>The difficulties that I face when continuing writing on my own were controlling myself from using similar ideas in the three body paragraphs, finding strong ideas, thinking all the time that my ideas are not strong enough to convince the reader, so i keep trying to find something better and this takes so much time and affects badly my concentration.</i>
Revising	<i>I read my essay many times and made a lot of corrections in spelling and punctuation</i>	<i>There was no specific time to start making changes, generally, I made them while writing. Sometimes, I'm focusing on writing for example the first paragraph at the same time changing some ideas in the introduction. In fact, I'm not satisfied with this habit at the same time I find it effective.The changes were either changing an adjective , an expression or an idea with another one that I can develop better than the first.</i>	<i>I started making changes on my writing right after I got the first feedback on what I wrote, and when I tried to deliver the final draft. The types of changes that I made have to do with the ideas that either were not expressed well, or those ideas which seemed to lack further explanation. Basically, I was trying to make the essay more accurate and precise. I tried also to pay attention to wordiness and not to mix between expressing orally and while writing.</i>

The students' reflections were quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed according to their relevance, depth of analysis and ability to question own their strengths and limits. Their responses were divided into the three main writing phases. The answers related to the planning stage demonstrate how students experience idea-generation and organization as well as goal setting. In the drafting stage, the participants are expected to report how they formulate their sentences and how they welcome their new ideas and monitor the coherence and relevance of their paragraphs. In the final writing phase, the students reflect about the organization of their revising process, what strategies they use, and suggest better ways to improve their process and products. The participants are encouraged to reflect on both their thinking and their emotions at each writing phase.

The following table displays an analysis of the final reflection. The final reflection was selected for analysis because the participants needed several weeks of practice before understanding the concept of reflective writing.

Table 2: Final Reflection Analysis

	Shallow	Medium	Deep
Planning	25.92% (7)	44.44% (12)	29.62% (8)
Drafting	74.07% (20)	14.8% (4)	11.11% (3)
Revising	22.22% (6)	40.74% (11)	37.03% (10)

The percentages displayed on table 2 show the depth of students' final reflection in each writing phase. It is noticed that 'drafting' is the writing stage with the lowest percentage of deep answers (11.11%). The number of students who could thoroughly reflect on their drafting process is limited to only three. This is probably due to the nature of drafting itself, which requires a total immersion of the writer and does not allow enough time to pause, step out and reflect. In fact, reporting on drafting relies on monitoring which is in most cases unconscious and difficult to access for learners with limited metacognitive ability. On the other hand, generating ideas, organizing, and revising involve more conscious thinking and allow more time for pauses and reflecting. As shown in table 2, a minority of reflections about the planning phase were categorized as shallow. Most students thoroughly reported their idea generation, selection, and their struggles while managing their anxiety in the initial phase of writing. The highest percentage of deep reflection (37.03%)

concerns the final writing stage, namely, revision and self-evaluation. It includes many instances of how students organized their revision with a special focus on their weaknesses in writing. For example, one participant wrote ‘*I needed to improve my unity and coherence. I bounce from one idea to the other*’. This shows that students could self-evaluate themselves and could recognize the aspects in writing in which their struggle the most, and their positive and negative habits. This is much more fruitful than when feedback is solely provided by the teacher.

The second objective of this study is to understand and explain how online reflective writing can be beneficial to second year EFL learners in the Department of English of the ENSC. The experiment held in the academic year 2020-2021 brings to light several important points. To begin with, introducing two new practices at once was not effortless. The students were just starting to accommodate to distant learning; hence, the initiation of writing regularly post-essay reflections was welcomed at first with some resistance from the participants. In fact, this practice requires a lot of time and efforts from both the students and the teacher. However, its rewards cannot be understated. Although students could not write interesting and lengthy reflections in the first weeks, the repetitive practice and the use of the peer assessment reflection rubric allowed the learners to understand the utility of thinking deeply about their own thinking.

The examination of the reflections shows that more numerous and elaborated instances of self-awareness and self-evaluation were present in the last reflections in comparison to the first ones. This means that frequent self-reflection increases metacognitive knowledge, as stated by Desautel (2009), ‘It has been my suspicion that self-reflection serves the goal of constructing metacognitive knowledge by making formerly unconscious, intangible, or reflexive processes or events explicit.’ (p. 2001). The students gained by the end of the training an awareness about their attitudes, emotional blockages, and mindsets while writing. As explained by Rodgers (2002, p. 858) ‘Awareness of our attitudes and emotions, and the discipline to harness them and use them to our advantage is part of the work of a good thinker’.

The regular exchange of reflective journals created a closer relationship with the teacher and an increased trust. This decreases the apprehensions that are

usually associated with writing, and in some cases, it solved major problems in their processes such as writer's block, procrastination, and perfectionism. It also makes of the well-written reflective paper a rich informative resource for the teacher to understand their learners' writing struggles. As a result, time is better managed and the atmosphere in the classroom is more comfortable and supportive.

Conclusion

In the digital age, assisting students to be effective life-long learners requires the inclusion of reflective thinking. This study examines the written reflections of second year ENSC students in the module of written expression. The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the reflections reveals that learners could develop more awareness and more ability to describe their writing strengths and weaknesses as the reflective training evolved. Although, at the beginning, the students showed a lot of resistance to welcome reflection as an additional task, the majority were after a few weeks able to deepen their self-reflection; especially when describing their emotions. The teacher's insight from this experience indicates that this practice can bring instructors and students closer as it increases the feeling of trust and interest. The students are more open to share their reflective journal and more interested in their own learning experience. In short, even though it does not work with all students, reflective writing contributes in improving self-awareness and self-evaluation skills; it also develops better attitudes towards writing.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest

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Appendix 1

Learners' Self-assessment and Peer Assessment Reflection Rubric (adapted from Steven Jones, University of Iowa)

Criteria	High 4	Satisfactory 3	Limited 2	Unsatisfactory 1
Relevance and depth of analysis (a)	Feelings thoughts, steps of the process and strategies are deeply and strongly revealed.	Feelings thoughts, steps of the process and strategies are revealed.	Feelings thoughts, steps of the process and strategies are shallowly/ weakly revealed.	None of the feelings thoughts, steps of the process and strategies are revealed.
Self-Criticism (b)	The reflection demonstrates ability of the student to question their own strengths and limits as writers and define solutions and new modes of thinking as a result.	The reflection demonstrates ability of the student to question their own strengths and limits as writers.	There's some attempt at self-criticism.	No attempt at self-criticism
Language use and clarity (c)	The language is clear and expressive.	Minor problems of clarity and accuracy	Frequent problems of clarity and accuracy	Language is unclear and confusing.