
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Understanding how Reflective Journal Writing Stimulates Reflective Reasoning: A Literature Review

Nawal Abrouq

Department of English Studies, Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco

Corresponding Author: Nawal Abrouq, **E-mail:** nawal.abrouq@uit.ac.ma

| ABSTRACT

Reflective journal writing is a pedagogical tool commonly used to help English as a foreign language (EFL) students develop and refine their reflective reasoning. Previous research has provided strong evidence in support of the effectiveness of this tool in promoting this mode of reasoning, but much of how it does so remains unclear. These studies do not explain how reflective journal writing enhances reflective reasoning as the focus was on the end-product, that is, on the cause-and-effect relationship. Therefore, more research is required to understand this developmental process and make it clear and explicit. The aim of this paper is to describe and discuss how reflective journal writing makes students engage in reflective reasoning and develop this skill. To achieve this purpose, a narrative review of the literature was undertaken. The analysis of the literature showed that the developmental process of reflective thinking through reflective journal writing occurs by activating and catalyzing reflective reasoning and making this thinking process visible to both educators and students, which is essential for its evaluation and improvement as well. This paper contributes to the understanding of how reflective journal writing stimulates reflective reasoning to inform didactic practices and optimize the outcomes.

| KEYWORDS

Reflective reasoning, reflective thinking, reflective journal writing, visible thinking.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Teaching soft skills has increasingly attracted the interest of scholars over the last decades because of their equal value to technical knowledge or hard skills. Reflective thinking is one of the soft skills that has much influence on academic as well as professional success. Essentially, in higher education literature, the large majority of the methods used to foster reflective thinking are centered on retrospective reflection (Rogers, 2001) or reflection-on-action (Schon, 1983, 1987). Even though there is a common agreement on the importance of using reflective journal writing to develop EFL students' reflective thinking, understanding how the process of journaling can stimulate reflective reasoning is an issue that undoubtedly necessitates more attention. Most of the existing body of research tends to adopt an empiricist perspective, as it focuses on the causal relationship between reflective journal writing and the stimulation of reflective reasoning. Little consideration was given as to how or the way this pedagogical tool enhances this mode of reasoning. This paper adopts a rather interpretive stance, as it addresses the need for both understanding and making explicit how engaging in reflective journals helps EFL students activate and develop their reflective reasoning. To achieve this aim, a narrative literature review was conducted. To Winchester and Salji (2016), a literature review is scientifically well-founded, and it offers a comprehensive examination of the topic. The literature review will be used as a springboard to provide a hermeneutic account of how reflective journals enhance students' reflective reasoning.

1.1 Reflective Reasoning

Reflective thinking is a specific mode of thinking that implies the use of specific mental processes. This cognitive process involves the act of stopping and thinking (Mezirow, 1991). This act of stopping, in turn, allows for a deep consideration of what has been experienced (Raelin, 2001). Specifically, reflective thinking makes individuals stop, step back from the experience, and ruminate on it. To clarify this process, Ratkic (2012) provides a metaphorical image referring to this act of stepping back as a mirror because thoughts are bent back, and past experiences are examined for the purpose of gaining a better understanding and making meaning of them. Similarly, Wade and Yarbrough (1996) compare the reflective act to a mirror. Both mirror and reflection are similar in that a mirror reflects an image and the thought process in the reflective act reflects the hidden aspects of prior experiences. Therefore, the ability to step back from the experience allows for de-centering (Bolam et al., 2003). The development of this mental place permits distancing oneself from the experience and mulling over it, hence allowing for internal experiences to be the object of observation (Grossman, 2009), analysis, and evaluation. Simply put, the creation of this mental place provides a neutral stand and allows for distancing oneself to look at the experience with an objective eye, and therefore putting it under critical scrutiny. For this reason, reflective thinking is based on reason and logic (Dewey, 1933) since it involves evaluation, analysis, and problem solving (Rivera, 2017). This explains why Dewey (1933) values this mode of reasoning. To him, it liberates individuals from routine and impulsive actions and allows them to act deliberately, thoughtfully, and intentionally, hence transforming impulsive, appetitive, and mindless actions into intelligent ones. To this end, reflective reasoning permits making informed decisions and well-thought-out judgments.

1.2 Reflective Journal Writing

The reflective journal is a piece of writing based on reflection and written on a regular basis over a period of time using free writing technique, though it may very well adhere to a certain structure (Moon, 1999b). In reflective journals, writing is a medium of reflection, as it enables students not only to think but also voice and articulate their thoughts and feelings. Essentially, reflection becomes visible through writing (Brigley, 2003). The reflective journal is the most frequent written format used to stimulate reflection (Kember, Jones, et al., 2001). On this basis, the utility of a reflective journal goes beyond merely reporting one's experience, that is, it is not limited to recording accounts and experiences outcomes (O'Connell & Dymont, 2013). It has this particularity of introspection (self-examination) and retrospection (review of past experiences). Wiersema and Licklider (2007) define introspection as an elaborate self-reflection on ones' motives, thoughts, and feelings. Consequently, reflection leads to self-awareness (Osterman, 1990; Pavlovich, 2007). Retrospection refers to the act of looking back on prior experiences to consider and analyze them. Accordingly, reflective journal writing entails not only recalling and describing personal experiences, but also critically considering them. Not only does this act of writing reflectively raise students' awareness of their own thinking process, but it also helps them to see things with a critical, objective eye.

2. Method

This paper aims to describe and discuss how reflective journal writing makes students develop reflective reasoning. To this end, a narrative literature review was conducted. The first step undertaken in this process was searching the relevant literature (e.g., scholarly empirical and non-empirical articles, book chapters, and books, among others). The searching strategy used was online databases, including ERIC, Google Scholar, and Scopus. The search process was restricted to the literature that was published between 2000 and 2020 using keywords, namely reflective thinking OR reflective reasoning AND reflective journal writing. To facilitate the selection process, inclusion and exclusion criteria were determined. The inclusion criteria include empirical as well as non-empirical studies published from 2000 to 2020. The exclusion criteria include all papers prior to 2000 and also papers published in a language other than English. After reading the abstracts, a total of 13 papers fulfilling the research criteria were selected. They were analyzed and synthesized to have a comprehensive understanding of how reflective journal writing activates and enhances reflective reasoning. The purpose was to make the relevant stakeholders aware of this issue because the effective development of students' reflective reasoning through this pedagogical strategy relies on understanding how this developmental process happens.

3. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the literature showed that reflective journal writing serves a dual-purpose converging towards one major outcome, namely developing reflective reasoning. It catalyzes and activates reflective thinking, and it makes this thinking process visible to both educators and students.

3.1 Reflective Journal Writing Makes Thinking Visible

Several scholars (e.g., Beed et al., 2005; Hubbs & Brand, 2005; O'Connell & Dymont, 2013; Park, 2003; Varner & Peck, 2003) shed light on the benefits of reflective journal writing for both educators and students. As such, the advantages of journaling are equally important for both educators and EFL students. First, it enables students to explore and examine their thoughts (Sanford, 1988), helps them to both clarify and externalize them (Kember, Leung, et al., 2006), encourages their self-expression (O'Connell & Dymont, 2013), and makes their thinking explicit (Sayers, 2005). Second, it provides educators with information about their

students' thoughts, reveals what they have learnt so far (Boud, 2001; Hubbs & Brand, 2005), provides an informative insight into their thinking and life as well (Ogilvy, 1996), and helps educators track the progress of their students as it provides developmental feedback (Hettich, 1990; O'Connell & Dymont, 2013).

To develop EFL students reflective thinking skills, making their thinking visible is a prerequisite. Hull et al. (2011) define visible thinking as "clarity and transparency in one's cognitive processes" (p. 2). Making thinking visible is at the core of cognitive apprenticeship theory (Collins et al., 1991, as cited in Ritchhart, 2015). Collins et al., (1991) note that in cognitive apprenticeship, thinking has to be deliberately brought to the surface so as to be made visible, notably in problem solving, writing, or reading. Essentially, the development of thinking skills depends on students' ability "to make explicit their ways of thinking, hear alternative ways of thinking, and reflect on their thinking" (Kok & Chabeli, 2002, p. 36). This view is supported by Ritchhart and Perkins (2008) who advocate that stimulating thinking necessitates making it visible because thinking occurs mainly in the individuals' heads, therefore, it is invisible both to themselves and to the others as well. To them, the ability to exteriorize thoughts via different methods, including writing, is an attribute of effective thinkers. Therefore, externalizing thoughts allows for their regulation and improvement (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2008). Similarly, Ritchhart (2015) notes that "this constant verbalization of one's thinking...externalizes a process so that it can become the object of attention and refinement" (p. 132). From this perspective, the process of externalizing thinking and making it visible by turning thoughts into words allows room for its evaluation and hence improvement. In addition to this, Smith (2002, as cited in Glevey, 2006) notes that the effective development of thinking relies on inculcating in students the dispositions or virtues among which clarity and depth of thought. Clarity of thought means that when thoughts are clear, students can easily articulate them; and depth reflects the quality of thoughts (e.g., profound, reflective, and contemplative). However, effective visible thinking is based on effective communication (Hull et al., 2011). In other words, making thinking visible relies on the ability to communicate effectively because when thinking is clear; it becomes easy to convert it into words, express, and describe it.

Reflective writing is among the panoply of ways by which students can make their thinking visible (Hull et al., 2011). It entails putting reflective thoughts into words following a specific organizational structure (Ramlal & Augustine, 2019). Sayers (2005) posits that writing a reflective journal and fulfilling its targeted objectives is a developmental process. To him, this development necessitates a thinking skill, that is, the capability of making explicit the reflective process which helps learners not only learn from the experience, but also draw conclusions. Sayers (2005) links the development of the ability to make thinking explicit through reflective journal writing to the ability to learn to shift in writing from the third person to the first-person narration (I), that is, using the first-person point of view. From this perspective, in reflective journal writing, using the first person permits centering one's attention on the self (i.e., thoughts, thinking, feelings, cognitive processes, action, and experience). This concentration on the self is one of the specificities of reflective journals. To this end, "journal writing is an investment in self through a growing awareness of personal thoughts and feelings" (Hiemstra, 2001, p. 24). Therefore, it develops self-awareness (Gleaves et al., 2008) of one's thinking process, feelings, thoughts, weaknesses, and strengths. In turn, this self-awareness facilitates the process of making one's thinking explicit. In this respect, Hubbs and Brand (2005) view reflective journal writing as a paper mirror and as "a vehicle for inner dialogue that connects thoughts, feelings, and actions" (p. 62). It discloses students' identity and self-knowledge of their own ideas and thought processes, legitimating personal ownership of these thoughts (Harris, 2008). Most importantly, reflective writing brings EFL students to a conscious level and raises their self-awareness and self-knowledge through self-examination as personal experiences are the object of their analysis. To McCrindle and Christensen (1995), self-knowledge entails being aware of one's weaknesses, strengths, motivation, and cognitive processes.

Reflective journal writing is a means by which reflective thinking processes become explicit and tangible (Rivera, 2017). It enables learners to examine, materialize, and clarify ideas and thoughts (Jones & Shelton, 2006). Additionally, it allows them to express in words their experienced perceptual and cognitive transformations, and also their learning achievements (Dunlap, 2006). In the same vein, Harris (2008) argues that the reflective act has the potential to make thoughts concrete and visible as it allows for both interaction and development of ideas via merging both thinking and writing in conversation, hence making writing not merely a technical activity, but a transformational one. Making thinking visible provides an insight into both the product of thinking (what) and the process of thinking (how) (Richhart & Church, 2020). Reflective journal writing has the potential to document both the process and product of thinking since the focus is not only on the end-product of thinking, but also on the process as well. Capturing the thinking process permits one to analyze and reflect on it (Richhart & Church, 2020). In so doing, it can be assessed and improved. Therefore, reflective journal writing provides voice to students' inner thoughts and ideas and documents their progress over time. The visibility gained from documentation enables them to reflect on their learning as this latter becomes the object for analysis (Richhart & Church, 2020). In sum, reflective journals serve various purposes. First, it is a means that makes reflective thinking visible because learners can externalize, voice, and document their reflective thoughts which can facilitate their evaluation and improvement. Second, it enables them to develop cognitive awareness as well.

3.2 Reflective Journal Writing Catalyzes and Activates Reflective Reasoning

Reflective journal writing has the potential not only to facilitate the process of making thoughts tangible and visible (Harris, 2008; Hull et al., 2011), but also to encourage thinking as well (Surbeck et al., 1991). The reflective ability is “epigenetic” and it has to be encouraged and learned (Gelter, 2003, p. 337). Reflective writing, with its various forms, is suggested as a means to facilitate, stimulate, and promote reflective thinking (Beed et al., 2005; Boud, 2001; Boud et al., 1985; Clarke, 2004; Ghanizadeh et al., 2020; Greiman & Covington, 2007; Kember, Leung, et al., 2001; Moon, 1999a; Scott, 2010; Sen, 2010; Song et al., 2005; Surbeck et al., 1991; Wade & Yarbrough, 1996; Wong et al., 1995). It does not only enhance reflective skills such as motivation and open-mindedness, but it also promotes other important skills, namely self-awareness and the ability to describe, observe, solve problems, critically analyze, evaluate, and synthesize (Richardson & Maltby, 1995). Therefore, it encourages them to think deeply (Beveridge, 1997; Kember, 1999; O’Connell & Dymont, 2013; Surbeck et al., 1991), enables them to engage in higher-order thinking skills, helps them to enhance their metacognitive ability (Rolheiser et al., 2000), reinforces cognitive awareness in examining past actions, and boosts confidence by valuing learners’ thought (Lindroth, 2014).

Reflective journal writing is an effective method used to stimulate students’ reflective thinking (Kallaiith & Coghlan, 2001; Kember, Leung, et al., 2001; Kok & Chabeli, 2002; Lew & Schmidt, 2011b; Lindroth, 2014; Pavlovich, 2007; Spalding & Wilson, 2002; Wong, 2016). Essentially, reflective journal writing is considered as a vehicle that documents and develops students’ reflective thinking (Gipe & Richards, 1992, as cited in Kaplan et al., 2007). It reinforces their learning and promotes their ability to reflect (Bell et al., 2011), boosts and documents reflection (Dunlap, 2006), and enables adult learners to promote their critical reflective competence regarding their learning (Hiemstra, 2001). In a similar vein, Taylor (2000) focuses on the importance of journal writing in stimulating reflective thinking. To her, such a means entails reviewing memories and thoughts using cognitive processes (e.g., meditation, contemplation, thinking, and any other form of reflection) for the purpose of making meaning out of them and also making necessary changes if needed. Based on this, reflective journal writing is a means through which EFL students can develop the required skills for reflection.

Reflective journal writing provides a powerful intervention which positively affects learners’ cognitive processes in a host of ways (McCrindle & Christensen, 1995). It has been favorably linked to the promotion of students’ metacognition (Lew & Schmidt, 2011a) as it promotes learners’ cognitive awareness and cognitive control or self-regulation (McCrindle & Christensen, 1995). Furthermore, it helps students to reflect on their metacognitive and cognitive skills development (Dunlap, 2002). Not only does reflective journaling help students reflect on their own thinking, but also it enables them to consider their learning processes as well (Parker & Goodkin, 1987). Beveridge (1997) schematizes how reflective journal writing generates reflective thinking. According to the author, this process permits one to capture a snapshot of one’s thinking by jotting it down, hence allowing room for refreshing the memory and reviewing what was internally and externally experienced. Therefore, reflective journal writing permits EFL students to stop, step back to have this neutral stance, and deeply consider past experiences, be they feelings, thoughts, or actions. It is based not only on describing and recalling experiences, but also analyzing and evaluating them. In so doing, the process of journal writing triggers EFL students’ cognitive efforts and makes them think reflectively through consciously and deliberately pondering on past experiences. Such a means makes the act and process of reflection conscious since the starting point for conscious reflection is centered on a past experience (Wade & Yarbrough, 1996). Similarly, Otienoh (2009) notes that reflective journal writing makes reflective thinking a conscious and purposeful activity. In this regard, conscious reflection is more effective and fruitful than when it occurs unconsciously. It enables learners to make aware and active decisions regarding their learning as bringing ideas to one’s consciousness permits their evaluation, and essentially, it helps to make informed future decisions (Boud et al., 1985). Similarly, Wilson (2008) notes that this conscious reflection upon past actions allows not only for appraising and evaluating what has occurred, but also identifying potential areas for improvement. Reflective journal writing is a powerful means used to provide insight into learners’ thinking by making both the process and product visible, activating and stimulating their reflective reasoning, and assessing their reflective ability as well.

4. Conclusion

Reflective journal writing is a pedagogical strategy used to serve various purposes, chief of which stimulating reflective reasoning. However, to optimize the results, it is important to understand how this developmental process takes place. The analysis of the literature shows that reflective journal writing serves a dual-purpose converging towards one major outcome, namely developing reflective thinking by making thinking visible and activating and catalyzing reflective reasoning. First, thinking is abstract and therefore it is not visible. To be aware of both the outcome or the end-product and the process of reflective thinking, it is important to make it visible through documentation in order to evaluate and assess its depth and quality. In reflective journals, writing is a medium of reflection. It helps to put into words this abstract reflective process, and hence externalizing and making it perceptible. This visibility makes the process of reflective reasoning the object of examination which in turn can lead to its improvement and development. Second, reflective journal writing activates and stimulates reflective reasoning by enabling EFL students to exert mental effort and use advanced cognitive processes. Reflective journals are not based merely on recalling, reviewing, and recording past experiences; but most importantly it takes students to a higher level by igniting their mental acuity through analysis and

critical evaluation. Being aware of all these insights is required for a successful implementation and an effective use of this pedagogical tool to cultivate EFL students' reflective potential and help them become independent, reflective thinkers.

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