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AUTHOR Bray, Eric; Harsch, Kenton
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ABSTRACT

Two teachers' experience with using reflective journals to help both teachers and students reflect on the teaching and learning processes is described. The technique was implemented in English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) classes in a Japanese university. Specific guidelines were established for students, and the journal format was a worksheet containing specific questions for students to answer, including questions for reflection and for review (vocabulary and phrase use and recall, pattern practice). Students worked on journals at the end of each class rather than outside the classroom. Benefits of this method for the teachers included increased awareness of teaching/learning processes, feedback for adjustment of classroom technique or presentation, creation of an additional basis for evaluating student progress, improved rapport with students, and added openings for classroom research. Benefits to students included increased awareness and autonomy, review and increased use of content, and creation of a forum for teacher-student communication. Techniques for journal design and use include using questions and tasks reflecting special student or teacher interests, targeting specific problem areas to raise student awareness, explaining why the journals are used and their role in evaluation, and limiting questions and tasks to the time available. Contains 20 references. (MSE)

Using Reflection/Review Journals in Japanese Classrooms

by

Eric Bray and Kenton Harsch

(A workshop based on this paper was given at the Japanese Association of Language Teachers Annual Convention, November 2, 1996)

The "reflective teacher" paradigm is an area of teacher development that has been given a great deal of attention in recent years. Some student teachers and teacher trainers have found that keeping a journal to aid reflection on their experience added depth to their understanding of the teaching/learning process (Holten & Brinton, 1995; Richards & Lockhart, 1994). As a result, some teachers have experimented with having their students reflect in writing using "reflective journals" (Carroll, 1994), and "learning logs" (Gottleib, 1995; McNamara & Deane, 1995) to raise student awareness and increase autonomy.

In this article, we will discuss a type of reflective journal we have developed called a "Reflection/Review Journal", a multi-purpose tool designed to aid the reflective efforts of both teachers and students while also encouraging the development of students' language skills. Before describing the benefits to teachers and students who use the journal, we will briefly describe how the journal came to have its present form.

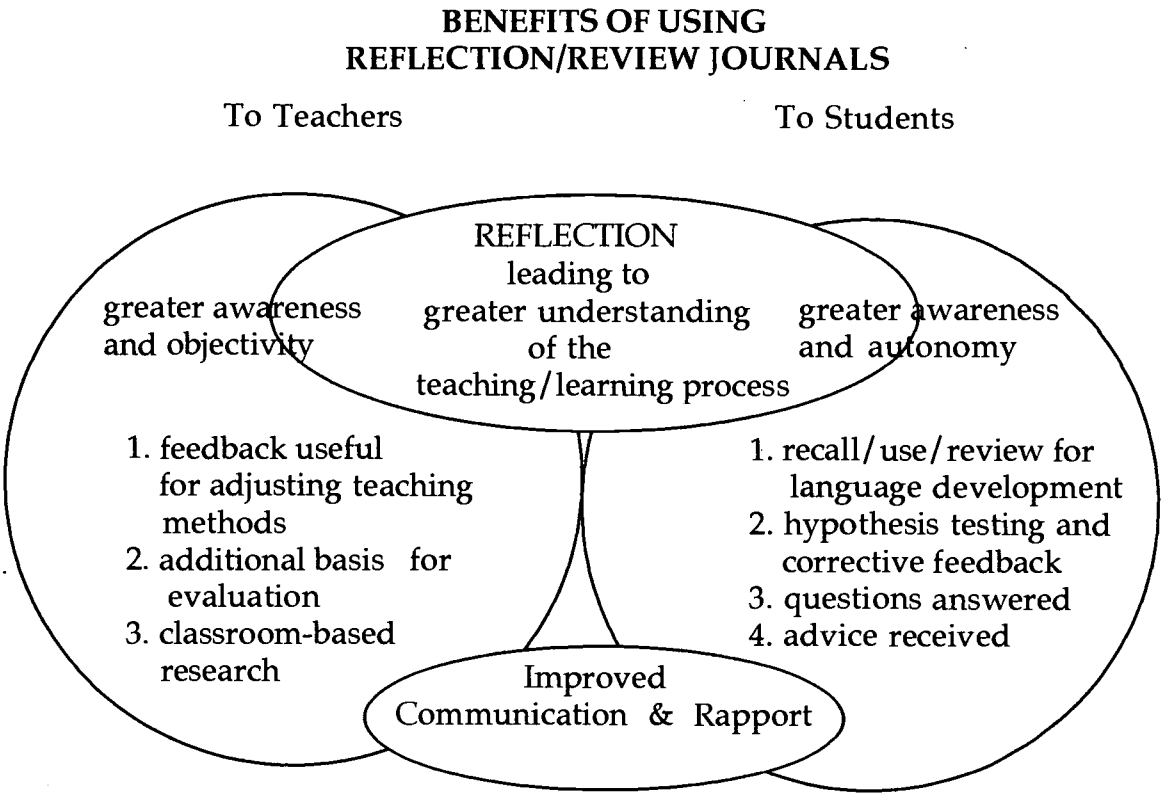
Development of the Reflection/Review Journal

In our first attempt to use a reflective journal we used an open format in which we asked our university oral English students to write every week about their experiences learning or using English. By the end of the year, we found that few students had consistently written anything reflective or insightful. Carroll (1994), who used an open format similar to ours, reported similar results: "Of the 29 students, 16 kept some form of a journal, and of these I judged 11 to be reflective journals" (p. 20). Since many students seemed unclear about what to write, we decided to provide clearer guidelines for reflection. (see also Matsumoto, 1996)

After reviewing the work of Slimani (1989, 1992) and Nunan (1995), we changed our journal format to a worksheet containing specific questions for students to answer (see Appendix A). In addition to questions for reflection, we also included questions asking students to recall and use important words, phrases, or patterns encountered in the lesson, since review of important material is a learning strategy often overlooked by students. Whereas in the first year we had asked students to work on their journals outside of class, with the new format we decided to have students do the journals during the last 10 to 15 minutes of class while the experience was still fresh in their minds.

We found that this new question-based journal format was clearly an improvement on the original format, and what follows is a discussion of the benefits of using the Reflection/Review Journal (see Figure 1 for an overview), followed by practical considerations for designing and using this type of journal.

Figure 1



Benefits to Teachers

Awareness of the Learning/Teaching Process

Teaching is a dynamic profession where change is a matter of course. Whether we are innovators of change or merely trying to keep up with it, one of the keys to our success is the growth of our awareness and understanding of the language learning/teaching process (Freeman, 1992). Typically, when we as teachers observe what happens in class and reflect on it, our understanding grows. This new understanding can serve as a basis for change in our teaching methods or goals. This informal approach to teacher development, however, has limitations: a) in class, we can only be in one place at a time, so we are limited in what we can observe; b) after class, reflection is constrained by memory; and c) our observations and reflections come mainly from our point of view as teachers.

This latter point seems particularly true in Japanese classrooms, where students are generally reluctant to ask questions or offer feedback. Reading students' journals provides another window into the learning process, through which we can see what students feel is important about their experience in class, and thus our objectivity can increase. We can also become more aware of the learning styles and problems of particular students in our classes.

In most cases, rather than resulting in ground-breaking revelations about language learning and teaching, reading the journals and reflecting on the lessons tended to confirm or reinforce our existing hunches/hypotheses about language learning. For example, in Question 2 we asked students to recall and take note of important words, phrases, and grammatical patterns from the lesson, and we found that vocabulary items were reported much more often than grammatical patterns. This result may reflect the way we taught our classes, but it could also confirm the commonly held assumption (e.g. Hatch, 1978) that intermediate learners are acutely aware of their need to learn vocabulary.

It was also interesting that several students consistently made note of vocabulary and patterns that were neither mentioned by the teacher nor included in the class material. As these items more than likely had come from other students, it further reinforced for us the value of pair and group work.

Neither of these observations resulted in new insights, but we found that when our own experience confirmed our hypotheses, it led to a deeper and more personalized understanding of the area in question. Additionally, reflecting on students' work in the journals can lead to changes and adjustments in how one teaches, as illustrated in the following section.

Feedback For Making Adjustments in Teaching

There are several ways that using the journals helps teachers get useful feedback. First, reflection on students' work in journals can lead to changes in how material is presented in general. For example, Item 3 was specifically designed to encourage students to try to use new words, phrases and patterns. From the outset we assumed that students would sometimes use these items incorrectly. Nevertheless, when reviewing this section of the journal, we often noticed the connection between how we had presented the vocabulary and the sentences students wrote. This led us to change the way we presented important vocabulary so as to include, whenever possible, examples of appropriate use of the word or phrase in context.

Secondly, reading the journals can also provide teachers with valuable feedback about specific activities. For example, a complaint often voiced by English teachers in Japan is that students rarely let the teacher know when they don't understand instructions. A case in point, one of the authors used a dictation activity to practice clarification questions, and felt it had gone rather well. However, after reading the journals, he realized that a few students had completely misunderstood the purpose of the task. They had not realized that the dictation activity was designed to practice the clarification questions they had just been introduced to; on the contrary, they thought they had to write every word just by listening. As the journals contained this useful feedback, it was possible to correct the misunderstanding in the next class.

A third point is that occasionally students make suggestions in the journals (e.g. "I'd like you to change our partners yourself. It's hard for us to go to someone we haven't talked to before", and "Sometime can we have whole group discussion instead of small groups?"). These suggestions helped us adjust our teaching to better meet the needs of particular groups of students.

Additional Basis for Evaluating Student Progress

It is very difficult to measure effort and improvement in classes that are large or of mixed levels. Quizzes and tests, either written or oral, too often show us how much students knew before entering our classes, but not necessarily how much they have learned. Evaluating learners based on class participation can too easily become a subjective measure of personality. Reading students' journals provides the teacher with another view of students' effort and improvement, effectively complementing other methods of evaluation.

Improved Rapport with Students

Another problem with large classes is that it can be difficult for teachers to establish good relationships with individual students. The journals provide a solution by serving as a non-threatening forum for authentic communication between students and their teacher. Over time this can lead to better rapport with the class as a whole, and make the classroom environment more conducive to learning.

Possibilities for Classroom-based Research

This journal format can also be very helpful for teachers who want to do classroom-based research. By writing specific journal questions about areas you want to explore, you can systematically collect data to use in the action-research spiral of "action-observation-reflection-change" posited by Kemmis & McTaggart, (1988). This feature will be discussed at greater length later in the section on "Journal Design and Other Practical Considerations"

Benefits to Students

The two main benefits to students who use the Reflection/Review Journal are expressed in the name we have given it, and are also consistent with the two primary goals of a learner-centered curriculum as elucidated by Nunan (1988) that learners develop "a critical self-consciousness of their role as active agents in the language learning process", as well as language skills (pp. 134-5).

Reflection Leading to Greater Awareness and Autonomy

Beginning with the first goal stated above, several teachers have written how having students reflect on their language learning has helped to raise learner awareness and increase autonomy (Carroll, 1994; Gottleib, 1995; Weisner, 1996; McNamara & Deane, 1995). This seems particularly important in Japan where students are accustomed to a rather passive, teacher-centered learning style more akin to lecture classes. Students often seem to come to foreign language classes expecting to be somehow "given English."

With this situation in mind we included a question in the journal asking students to reflect on what was difficult for them in the lesson (Item 5). By "thinking aloud" on paper, students can become more aware of their needs and problems, and from there it is a short jump to considering solutions. One student complained of lacking vocabulary for discussing current events, but in the next sentence suggested a possible solution by asking, "Do you think it would help to watch CNN?". Of course, when a student can't make the jump, the teacher can suggest solutions or learning strategies appropriate to the student's current needs.

Review/Use Leading to Language Development

The other main goal of a learner-centered curriculum is for students to develop language skills. This has traditionally been the primary goal of language teaching. Learners who have accomplished the difficult task of becoming proficient in a foreign language usually say that it required a lot of hard work and study. However, it seems that in the race to move on to new material, the basic

language learning strategy of reviewing important material in order to consolidate learning is often overlooked by students and teachers alike.

Particularly in the area of vocabulary acquisition, research shows that repeated contact with a word is necessary in order to learn it, (Crothers & Suppes, 1967; and Saragi, Nation & Meister, 1978; cited in Nation, 1990). Extensive contact with the foreign language through reading or listening can provide the necessary input over time, but a more efficient strategy would be to review repeatedly those words, phrases and patterns one would like to acquire. Hence, we have included in this journal a section (Item 2) where students recall and write down new and important language items encountered in the lesson, and then circle the most important items for review later.

Work on memory by Craik and Lockhart (1972) indicates that repeated contact may not be as important a factor in vocabulary learning as the "depth of processing" when working with the new language item. For example, recalling a word (Item 2) requires more depth of processing than merely reading it from a list, and creating a sentence in which the word is used (Item 3) would require more depth of processing than merely recalling it. Thus, Item 3 is important because it is through usage and the depth of processing that it requires that semantic associations are accessed and elaborated, and this, according to Craik and Lockhart, leads to better memory of the item.

Usage is also important to learners as it encourages them to develop their knowledge of the word. Nation (1990) has written extensively on what it is to "know a word" and suggests that this knowledge is elaborate and includes various meanings of a word, how the word functions in grammatical patterns and collocations, as well as issues of appropriacy. Students' attempts to use the words, phrases or structures in context are an expression of their developing interlanguage and thus will contain errors. Interlanguage is characterized as being a "temporary system that is restructured as the learner tests hypotheses and adds, drops or modifies rules as a result of these trials" (O'Malley, Chamot and Walker, 1987, p. 301).

It has been posited that this restructuring occurs when students "notice the gap" between their understanding of a language item and what they encounter in input (Schmidt and Frota, 1986), and that the teacher may be able to aid in this restructuring process by drawing students' attention to incorrect usage. Ellis (1995) expands on this notion by suggesting that language development not only

involves disconfirming incorrect hypotheses in the interlanguage, but also confirming correct ones, a process which he calls "cognitive comparison". Hence, by working on the review/use section of the journal, and noting where the teacher did and did not make corrections, students' interlanguage should gradually develop.

One last point is that although timely corrective feedback is important to students, it is normally difficult to give because of class size. Also, many teachers prefer not to correct students during fluency-based tasks, either so as not to interrupt communication, or because they believe that students find it difficult to attend to or remember correction while focusing on the demands of a communicative task. Item 3 addresses these concerns by providing a non-threatening forum for corrective feedback where the teacher can give students the personalized help they need to gain a better understanding of how important language items function in context. (It should be noted that Item 3 is the only section of the journal where we suggest correcting students' writing.)

A Forum for Communication

The journal also serves as a forum for communication in which students can get advice and answers to questions. We have included an open question (Item 6) asking students to note any questions about the lesson, English, or language learning in general. Basic questions about the teacher's life and culture also tend to come up here. This section is useful as it encourages students to think about what they would like to know and communicate this to the teacher. This helps them to get the information and advice they need while also satisfying to some extent the desire many students have to communicate more directly with their teacher.

Another way that the journals can be helpful is when students have unrealistic expectations for their language learning and become discouraged. For example, one of the authors used a short excerpt from a film in class, and a student wrote in her journal that she couldn't understand most of what the actors were saying. Here it was explained that the goal for this activity was not that students understand everything, but rather, that they be exposed to patterns and vocabulary to be used in the speaking activity to follow. It was then suggested that if the student wanted to, she could do more intensive listening practice with the film in the language lab or at home. In situations like this the teacher can provide

a useful reality check for students helping them maintain realistic expectations for their language use and learning (McNamara & Deane, 1994).

Journal Design and Other Practical Considerations

So far in this paper we have discussed the benefits of using a particular type of reflective journal format that we a call a Reflection/Review Journal. In order to help you maximize your success with this type of journal, we have several suggestions regarding its design and use.

You may want to include questions or tasks according to your interests or your students' needs. Journals can be exploratory in nature, or they can be designed as a research tool to collect data to answer specific questions. For example, if you were working on having students develop language learning strategies, you could explore this area by including a question where your students report any language learning strategies they have used in the previous lesson or past week. However, if you wanted to do more focused action-research in this same area, you could use the journals with two classes, utilize a different approach to teaching about learning strategies in each class, and then compare the two classes' journal entries in this section (Noel Houck, personal communication).

You can also include questions targeting specific problem areas where you want to raise students' awareness. In classes where excessive use of Japanese is a problem, you could include a question like, "How much English did you use in class today?" If student effort is a problem, you could ask students to reflect on this by answering a question like, "How hard did you work today?"

Students' efforts on the journal itself will directly relate to the benefits they derive, so you may want to tell them that your evaluation of their efforts on the journal will factor into their final grade for the course. Initially, it is important to explain to students why you are having them do the journals, and perhaps give them a model of a few journal pages that you think are particularly well done. In order to reinforce the importance of the journals, you could allow students to use the journals when doing quizzes and tests. Another approach would be for you as the teacher to work on your own journal during the time that students work on theirs.

Practically speaking, it is important to remember when designing the journal you will use in your class that the number of tasks or items and their difficulty directly relates to the time it will take both you and your students to complete them. By limiting the number of items, you are more likely to get quality reflection from students and also be able to give quality responses. We usually have the students work on the journals in the last 10-15 minutes of class, and either read them while they work or collect them to be read outside of class. For teachers with large classes or busy schedules, using journals with one or two classes will give ample material for reflection without adding too much to their work load.

Just as using a warm-up activity at the beginning of class has become standard procedure for many teachers, we have found that working on the journals at the end of class creates a clear closing activity which focuses students on consolidating what they have learned that day. Thus, it has become a valuable part of our daily classroom routine. Though working with the journals requires some extra work by the teacher and valuable minutes of students' class time, we feel the benefits to both teachers and students are well worth the effort.

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Eric Bray can be reached at:

46-2 Teramachi Ebisugawa Agaru
Nakagyo-ku, Kyoto, Japan, 604
e-mail- ebray@mbox.kyoto-inet.or.jp

Kenton Harsch can be reached at:

1330 Wilder Ave. #317
Honolulu, Hi., USA, 96822
e-mail - kenton@pop-server.hawaii.edu

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Student Reflection Journal

1. What did today's lesson focus on?

2. What new words, phrases, or patterns did you work with today?

(now circle the ones you want to review later)

3. Write three sentences using the new words, phrases, or patterns.

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4. What else did you learn today?

5. What was difficult for you to do today?

6. Do you have any questions about this class, English, or language learning in general?

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Organization/Address: Yokkaichi University
1200 Kayo-cho, Yokkaichi shi
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FAX:

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