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PROMOTING STUDENT REFLECTION THROUGH REFLECTIVE WRITING TASKS

Elena Taylor, Ph.D.

Abstract

Reflection is a necessary component of learning. Through reflective assignments and tasks, students are given opportunities to evaluate their learning and analyze strategies they use while acquiring and applying course material. Reflections also help students assess and think deeply about the information presented in class and thus better retain it. Through reflecting on their learning, students are also given the opportunity to formulate goals for future improvement. Reflective tasks can be implemented in any classroom, and writing is a powerful tool to do that. This article describes several writing tasks that promote student reflection both on the course material and on their own performance: writing reflective journals, reflections on writing assignments, reflections on teacher and peer feedback, writing-to-learn activities, and letters to the Reviewer.

Keywords: reflection, self-evaluation, writing

“We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience” (John Dewey).

Introduction

Reflection has long been seen in education as a necessary component of learning. John Dewey, the American philosopher, defined 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 the further conclusions to which it tends” (Dewey, 1933, p. 118). The importance of learners’ awareness of their own learning processes and experiences has been emphasized by many educators and has become a foundation for several learning theories (e.g., Kolb, 1984; Mezirov, 1991; Revans, 1982). At the basis of these theories is the idea that learning is better achieved through experience and action, which includes learners’ reflection on their learning experiences and processes, rather than through the passive acquisition of knowledge and skills (Pais Marden & Herrington, 2021).

The literature describes a number of benefits that learners’ reflection has on the effectiveness of the learning process. When students reflectively approach their learning, they develop their critical thinking skills and problem-solving strategies (Crane & Sosulski, 2020; Fullana, Pallisera, Colomer, Fernández Peña, & Pérez-Burriel, 2016; Pais Marden & Herrington, 2021). They can see the application of the knowledge obtained in the classroom more clearly by becoming better aware of connections between the materials learned in class and their own lives (Crane, 2018). Through reflections, learners also develop the ability to evaluate both successes and setbacks in their performance and make goals for improvement (N. Anderson, 2012; Ryan, 2013). As N. Anderson (2012) stated, “When learners engage in reflecting upon their learning, they become better prepared to make conscious decisions about what they can do to improve themselves [...]” (p.

182). Carefully crafted and regularly implemented reflective activities can also activate student metacognitive processes¹ by allowing them “to examine and evaluate their personal investment of time and energy in learning” (Crane & Sosulski, 2020, p. 86), thus creating the opportunity for deeper and more active learning (Pais Marden & Herrington, 2021). All these abilities facilitate learner autonomy and help students become independent and responsible learners in the future (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010; Andrade & Evans, 2013; Benson, 2007).

Reflective components find their place in my own everyday classroom routine. Based on several years of my language teaching experience, I noticed that through reflection on their own learning, the use of language-learning strategies, and factors influencing their learning, students can gain a better understanding of their language development. However, I also know that it may be challenging for students to engage in self-driven, independent reflection. According to Crane and Sosulski (2020), “Reflection [...] best serves students when it is carefully structured (e.g., written reflections and directed discussions), guided by another individual (e.g., a teacher or mentor), and linked to clear learning objectives” (p. 75). Therefore, as a teacher, I try to incorporate structured reflective elements in my courses, which primarily consist of English-language learners of various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, to maximize students’ learning experiences and help them succeed at the university and beyond.

The practical implementation of reflective elements in a course (e.g., tasks, activities, assignments) can take multiple forms: written and oral, group and individual, formal and informal. In my own language classes, I often implement reflective writing by assigning individual reflective writing tasks, which allow students to analyze course projects, activities, or their own performance and make personal goals for improvement.

Reflective writing is described in the literature as a process that involves a transformation of experiences and life events into thoughts and feelings, along with personal opinions, viewpoints, judgments, and critical evaluation (Moon, 2001). Ramlal and Augustin (2020) define reflective written pieces as “very personal but also very critical” because, along with a summary of life experiences, they also demonstrate the writer’s “critical thinking, critical engagement, critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis” (p. 520). Morrison (1996) suggests that through writing reflections, writers can critically assess their experiences and observations and make meaning of them, which may promote their personal development. Similar views are found in Gibbs (1988), whose model of reflective writing culminates in action plans that the writer makes as a result of analysis, reflective evaluation, and interpretation of thoughts and feelings.

Research on reflective writing also addresses its implementation in the classroom by describing reflective activities and discussing their pedagogical value and consequences for student learning. Grossman (2008) discusses four types of reflections—content-based reflections, metacognitive reflections, “self-authorship” reflections, and transformative and intensive reflections—and their implementation in a wide range of courses. Greene (2011) suggests that the implementation of guided student questions, letters to self, peer editing exercises, and creative writing activities can encourage students’ self-examination, deep retrospection, and metacognition. Orem (2001) focuses on one type of reflective writing, journal writing, and refers to it as a powerful teaching technique in a language classroom that can empower learners by giving them the opportunity to reflect on their learning processes and practice authentic language.

Some researchers describe pedagogical approaches and propose suggestions for promoting student knowledge of processes involved in writing reflections and enhancing their metacognition and reflective abilities. For example, Greene (2011) and Ramlal and Augustin (2020) propose modeling as a pedagogical tool that can increase students’ ability to write thoughtful, more evaluative reflections. Ryan (2011), on the other hand, suggests that providing students with models of effective reflections is not enough for the development of their own reflective skills; therefore, in order for students to achieve success in reflective writing, they need to be explicitly taught and scaffolded. Ramlal and Augustin

1. Metacognitive processes are defined as processes of “reflecting on and directing one’s own thinking” (National Research Council, 2001, p. 78).

(2020) found that implementing peer editing and collaborative group work may be beneficial in helping students develop their reflective writing skills. Using social media applications, such as Google Docs, was also described as an effective pedagogical strategy that improves student reflective writing (Marciano, 2015; Ramlal & Augustin, 2020; Zheng, 2013). Finally, rubrics that guide students' writing activities and help them critically evaluate their writing were found to be effective in promoting students' metacognitive skills that help them produce more critical reflections (Ramlal & Augustin, 2020).

In this article, I describe several writing tasks used in my own classes that promote student reflection both on the course material and on their own performance: writing reflective journals, reflections on writing assignments, reflections on teacher and peer feedback, writing-to-learn activities, and letters to the Reviewer. Following the description of each reflective task, I will explain how the task can be used in the classroom and provide a few examples of students' written responses. All reflective tasks described in this article were implemented in my own courses with English language learners, but they can be adjusted to a variety of instructional contexts and be applicable to diverse student populations.

Writing Reflective Journals

Description

Writing development is challenging to track. Based on my experience, students may not always be aware of the positive progression of their writing skills. Therefore, in my writing courses, I implement reflective journals² to facilitate students' self-reflection and help them notice positive improvements in their writing. The purpose of reflective journals is to provide students with the opportunity to think about and analyze their learning processes (Carroll, 1994; Farrah, 2012; Orem, 2001). Because I follow a multi-draft approach in my writing courses, students receive a short reflective prompt for each draft they submit over the course of the semester. Along with aiming to promote students' reflective and analytical skills and raise awareness of their writing development, I also strive to align these reflective journals with the course material. Therefore, the journal prompts in my classes are designed to help students reflect on the application of the material presented in the course to their own writing. For example, if we had a recent lesson on paragraph unity, a prompt may ask students to reflect on the flow and cohesion of sentences in their paragraphs.

Implementation

As I mentioned, in my writing classes, students receive a reflective prompt on each draft they compose in the course. Their responses are expected to be no longer than 250 words—not to overburden them with additional writing load and thus maintain their motivation. For convenience, teachers can design a labeling system to keep the prompts (and students' responses) organized. For example, to label prompts of reflective journals in my classes, where three drafts are normally required for each writing project, I use two numbers—the first one to indicate the writing project and the second one to indicate the draft (e.g., 1.1, 1.2, 1.3; 2.1, 2.2, 2.3). However, these reflective journals can also be implemented in courses (not necessarily writing courses) where students only submit the final version of their writing assignments.

Below I provide some examples of the prompts used in my classes:

2. An interested reader may also want to consider the following literature on reflective journal writing practice: J. Anderson, 2012; Boud, 2001; Boutet, Vandette, & Valiquette-Tessier, 2017; Dymont & O'Connell, 2011; Lew & Schmidt, 2011; Moon, 2006; Thorpe, 2004; Walker, 1985.

- 1.1 What did you do to come up with ideas for your paper as you were working on this first draft? What or who helped you? Describe and evaluate the effectiveness of this invention process.
- 1.2 You already learned about transition words between sentences and paragraphs. Describe what you did in order to decide where to use transition words and which ones to use in your draft.
- 1.3 Pretend a local newspaper is interested in buying your paper for \$10,000 in order to publish it. What revisions do you think you could make to polish this final draft so that the newspaper would be happy to pay that much?
- 2.1 Think about the audience of your paper. What rhetorical features (e.g., style, tone, language) did you choose in your paper to appeal to your audience? Are the overall content and organization of this paper appropriate for this audience?
- 2.2 What is the most important information you learned about integrating academic sources in your paper? How was this knowledge applied in your second draft?
- 2.3 Why do you think this annotated bibliography would be helpful to someone interested in this topic? What makes it effective? Provide specific examples.
- 3.1 What is the most helpful and important thing that you learned about integrating quotations? How did you use this information as you were working on your first draft?
- 3.2 What do you think can strengthen your argument? Providing additional support (evidence)? Including counterclaims with rebuttals? Something else? Provide specific suggestions.
- 3.3 You just completed the third project of this course. What do you think you have improved the most in your writing up to this point? What helped you improve it? How did you notice your improvement?

These prompts are designed to help students become more aware of their composing processes and notice their growing ability as writers. They can also help the teacher assess students' progress in the course—that is, their understanding of the material and its application to students' writing, their writing challenges that need to be addressed in class or during individual writing conferences (if applicable), and their achievement of the course learner outcomes.

Examples

Here are a few student examples of reflective journal entries:

Example 1

Question

What is the most helpful and important thing that you learned about integrating quotations? How did you use this information as you were working on your first draft?

Student Response

In the past, I rarely used quotations. For example, I used the famous words of a person to introduce a topic or improve my voice. However, I never used quotations from an interview for a paper. So, using quotations for this purpose was new to me when I started writing the first draft. The expert that I interviewed for my project gave me many helpful opinions, so I used his words in my argumentative essay.

The most helpful thing I learned about quotations was the format. The words and phrases given in class, like “in his or her opinion” or “he/she suggested,” were helpful to me. Learning about how to correctly use quotations helped improve my essay, and I hope to use this information in my future papers.

I also learned a lot about indirect quotations, and I never heard about them before. But the information in class helped me paraphrase some words of the expert that I interviewed for my project. I didn't use many paraphrases in my argumentative essay because I think it's easier for me to use direct quotes than to paraphrase them. So I think I need more practice in paraphrasing, and I hope to feel more comfortable using paraphrasing in my future papers.

Example 2

Question

You already learned about transition words between sentences and paragraphs. Describe what you did in order to decide where to use transition words and which ones to use in your draft.

Student Response

I wrote my first draft for this project as an interview report. My topic was about the dining problem faced by international students at our university. For my interview report, I first took the interview of a credible person with their insight into the problem. For my second draft, I made some changes based on the feedback I had received. Out of the changes I made, one of the major revisions included adding transitions to maintain the flow of the report. Transitions are an important and integral part of any paper. Transitions help the reader to continuously read the paper without feeling distracted or going off-topic. They help the writer to make a jump from one topic to another in a smooth way. In order to put transitions in my paper, first I proofread my draft and marked the points where there was a change in topic or an abrupt shift from one main point to another, which disrupted the smooth flow of the paper. This is how I decided on the places where I needed to put transitions. After this, I looked at the feedback I received from my instructor about transitions and added some more places where a transition was required. Finally, based on the conference I had with my teacher, I decided how and which transitions to use. I used simple transitions in areas where there was not a major shift and longer and more complex transitions in areas where there was a complete change of theme.

Example 3

Question

You just completed the third project of this course. What do you think you have improved the most in your writing up to this point? What helped you improve it? How did you notice your improvement?

Student Response

I think the most important parts that improved my writing were organization and sentence fluency. In the past, I learned a bit about this, and I always used to place a lot of importance on these aspects. However, I was still able to improve a bit more because I was able to learn more about transitions and styles that I could use in my writing.

Learning about quotations was also very important to me because I did not use them that often in the past unless I used a quote from a famous person to introduce my topic. I think having this opportunity to improve my quotation skills will help me in future research proposals and papers. Furthermore, having the chance to practice writing quotations also helped me become more comfortable with using quotations.

I was able to see my progress when I looked at my papers. Whenever I proofread, I began to notice that I used different transition words or phrases from what I used in the past. For the quotations, I was also able to see my progress based on my experience editing my papers.

Gaining these skills certainly helped me in this project, and hopefully, they would help greatly as I write my papers in the future. It is true that learning or gaining new skills may be a bit difficult because it may take time to learn and to fully integrate them into my work. However, reflecting on what I learn can certainly help me improve my writing in the future.

Reflections on Writing Assignments

Description

In addition to reflective journals, where students reflect on separate drafts of their writing projects, students can also be asked to evaluate and reflect on their overall experience writing a paper, that is, after the final product is completed. Therefore, this approach would work well in classes where students are required to submit only the final draft of their writing assignment. The purpose of these reflections is to give students a chance to reflect on their process of working on the assignment, express their “intellectual and emotional reactions” (Nilson, 2010, p. 169) to it, articulate the strengths and weaknesses of their writing, and formulate goals for future improvement.

Implementation

Students are assigned to write a short (500 words or so) reflective piece that includes a personal exploration of the work they did while planning, organizing, doing research, and writing their paper. To facilitate this process in my classes, I provide students with a list of guiding questions; however, students are instructed to compose a coherent, essay-like reflective paper rather than simply answer these questions. Here are examples of these questions:

The Assignment

- Briefly describe the assignment or the project you are reflecting on.
- What was your purpose for writing this paper/for completing this project? How did you accomplish this purpose?
- Who was your audience for this paper/this project? How did you adjust your writing to accommodate your audience?

Your Writing Process

- Describe your writing process. If you were not given a specific topic, how did you decide on a topic? How did you find the information? What changes did you make to your paper in each draft? Why did you make those changes? How did you proofread your paper?
- Of what value was an outline for your paper when you were writing?
- Describe the work with your team (if applicable). What was the hardest part of your teamwork? What did you learn from working with your classmates? What was the most rewarding part of working collaboratively?
- While writing this paper, what new things did you learn about the process of writing?
- Describe your research process. How did you decide where to put the researched information into your paper? What was the most difficult part of including research? How can you make it easier?
- What feedback did you receive that you think was helpful? Why was it helpful and how did you go about this feedback?
- In what ways is the final draft of your essay better than your first draft? Study both drafts and list specific ways it is

better.

General Questions

- What do you like about this paper? Why?
- What was the most important thing you learned from this assignment?
- What was the hardest/easiest part of this assignment? Why?
- Which ideas in your paper have you found the most exciting to write about? Why?
- What do you wish you could have done differently?
- What would you change if you were asked to complete the same or a similar assignment?
- What skills did you improve the most while working on this assignment?
- What areas of your writing and researching skills do you want to improve based on this assignment?

Examples

Below I include two examples of student reflections.

Example 1

The assignment was to write a research paper. I chose the topic of arguing that using affirmative action in the college application process is wrong and should be banned. My report was geared toward college students. The main purpose was to inform the students about this issue and show my viewpoint. To accommodate the audience, I had to use ethos, pathos, and logos to convince the audience to believe me. I started my writing by outlining to organize my ideas. This helped because if I didn't start with it, my ideas would be scattered without a direct line of thought. First, I chose my topic and then started gathering information from reliable sources. Then I had to do research more specifically on the use of affirmative action in colleges. During my research, I found most of my sources from the EBSCOhost database. Throughout this assignment, I learned how to use ethos, logos, and pathos to persuasively develop my argument. Along with this, I learned a new style of writing. Writing an argumentative paper is not like a regular report because you have to do a lot of research to know your topic thoroughly. You also have to demonstrate both sides. So, if you are arguing for something, you still have to address the naysayers who disagree with your point of view.

The most difficult part of the assignment was trying to find enough useful information. I also had to decide how I wanted to organize my paper, break up the paragraphs, and use transitions between those paragraphs. The easiest part was writing up an outline—I knew the direction I wanted my paper to go. It was just more difficult to get it down on paper. Since I got all my sources from an online database, this made it easier to obtain a great deal of information—I just had to sort through it all to see if I could use any of it in my drafts.

There are a few major differences between my first draft and my final draft. One of them is my paragraph style. My first draft was very poorly constructed with only two paragraphs, and they were just extremely long. In the final draft, I made it look professional by using smaller paragraphs with transitions in between. I found that writing this research paper was more difficult than I imagined it would be. If I had to do this assignment again, one thing that I would do differently is change the format of the first draft. If I would have gotten the paragraphs right the first time, I could have had more time to work on other areas of the paper. The skill that I have improved the most during this assignment is writing annotated bibliographies. I never had to make one before, so this was a learning experience for me. I hope that for the next assignment I can improve my writing skills even more.

Example 2

For this project, I was assigned to a group of five members, and we were instructed to do in-depth research on the various religions practiced amongst the students at our university and the different clubs, organizations, and facilities offered in affiliation to the different religions. I narrowed down my research by looking primarily at the religions that are the most widely practiced on campus and found that they are Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. We constructed a research paper and a PowerPoint presentation focusing on these three religions and the involvement of the members of both international and local students.

The first draft I made for this project was more rushed and not to the level that I usually do my work. I was at first disappointed in myself and actually had forgotten how time-consuming writing a paper was, but now I know how to better manage my time for it. However, I greatly appreciated our teacher's helpful suggestions and tried to use them in my final draft.

The religious aspect of this assignment made it more difficult to focus on the interaction with international students but the way I went about tying them together was by talking to international students and seeing how they involved themselves in these organizations and what positive experiences they took from them. I found that more international students than I initially thought surprisingly do not strongly affiliate themselves with a specific religious institution, but they find the different clubs, organizations, and institutions educational and helpful to them in achieving a better sense of unity and acceptance on campus.

Most students here feel like they need to believe in the religion to attend or participate in the organizations corresponding to that religion which is simply not the case. In fact, all religions have opportunities for prospective members, or simply students who are curious about the religion, to be involved. Considering that the audience for this project was the students at our university, I wanted to make sure I emphasized the copious amounts of opportunities available to everyone regarding the different religions and help them realize that the sole purpose for being involved with them does not have to be because you necessarily believe in that religion. These religions offer opportunities such as retreats, community service, dinners, and other ways to strengthen their religious community and bring about awareness of their faith.

This project was both an individual and team effort. It was individual because though I was working with others to find information and discuss our topic, I still did my own research and made my own conclusions based on the information I found. Each member in our group took a different route in conveying the information attained but focused on the same information. I enjoy working with others, but I usually find it difficult working in groups because the work is rarely ever distributed evenly, and some people end up picking up the slack from others. However, I found it very enjoyable working with an international student because it gave me better insight into the project, and I spoke with her a great deal about her personal feelings here on campus and her transition. I have not had that much experience working with international students and have heard that most people found it to be either a good or bad experience because of the language barrier, but I definitely had a great experience and strongly commend my partner for working so diligently despite the challenges. I think this was a beneficial assignment because it allowed me to become more comfortable with researching, writing, and presenting the findings of my research.

Reflections on Teacher and Peer Feedback

Description

Another way of helping students to self-assess their work and make goals for improvement is to have them reflect on the feedback they receive from classmates and the teacher on their performance. I implement this approach for oral presentations in my classes for English language learners. On each presentation given during the course, students receive feedback

from their peers and me. Then based on this feedback, students write a short reflection on what they learned from their classmates' and teacher's comments and how they can improve their performance in the future.

Implementation

This approach can easily be implemented in any course where students are expected to give an oral presentation. It can also be adapted for writing assignments if peer feedback is part of the curriculum. Here is an example of the prompt that I use (with slight modifications) in my courses for English language learners:

Instructions: Based on the feedback you received from the teacher and your classmates, write down your thoughts on how you can improve your presentations for the future. Include both your oral performance and your PowerPoint slides. Provide specific examples referring to the feedback (e.g., *“I was told my PowerPoint slides need to contain bullet points with key phrases instead of complete sentences. Therefore, for my future presentations, I will...”* or *“My classmate suggested I start my presentation with an interesting fact or question to catch the audience’s attention. In my subsequent presentations, I will...”*). Remember: This activity will help you analyze your performance, develop critical thinking, and track your growth, which, in turn, will help you become a reflective and autonomous learner.

Examples

Below are a few examples of student reflections:

Example 1

In the feedback I received on my presentation today, I was told that I tend to rush through my slides, so in my future presentations, I will try to slow down and present the information better without skipping important details presented on the slides. Both my teacher and my classmates also told me that I need to cite my sources. Therefore, in my future presentations, I will give credit to the sources where I take information for my presentation. I think it will make my presentations more credible. Another comment that I received and that I will try to improve in the future is providing specific examples to illustrate my points. I will work on all these helpful suggestions in the future and try to improve in any way I can to make my presentations better. Thank you!

Example 2

My teacher suggested adding some visual elements to my PowerPoint slides; therefore, for my future presentations, I will include pictures and other images. I think if I include pictures in my PowerPoint slides, my presentation will be more exciting for the audience. I was also suggested not to use complete sentences but use bullet points instead, with keywords and phrases. I think it's an important tool, and I will try to use it for my future presentations. I was also told that I should provide a concluding slide because my today's presentation ended abruptly. I will make sure to include a conclusion for my audience in the future, so it doesn't end as a surprise for them. The feedback from my teacher and classmates was very helpful for me.

Example 3

The comments that I received for this presentation were helpful. For example, I was told that I need to improve my gram-

mar, that I could include a relevant video in my presentation, and that I could add more colors to my slides. I think those were good comments, and I will use them to make my next presentation better. I will pay more attention to my grammar when I practice my presentation. I will also try to find a video and add more colorful slides. I will also keep doing things that my teacher and my classmates said were good, such as good eye contact and body language, clear examples and explanation, and helpful pictures. I understand that pictures can help my classmates follow my presentation more easily and better understand what I am trying to explain. And in my personal opinion, I think I should provide more examples for my audience during my presentation.

Writing-to-Learn Activities

Description

My first experience with writing-to-learn activities was when I was a student in an intensive English program. The teacher in my academic reading class frequently implemented these activities in class to help us reflect on the content of the lesson and the reading materials we were discussing. As a language learner, I found those informal writing tasks engaging and beneficial as they gave me opportunities to express myself in English as well as analyze information presented in the course at a deeper level.

Writing-to-learn activities (WTL) are short and informal writing tasks that engage students in reflective thinking about key concepts, ideas, and material presented in the lesson. These informal writing activities can be implemented at different stages of the lesson and in any situation in which students could benefit from reflecting on what they are doing and learning in class. By encouraging students to actively think about the course material, WTL activities can help students more effectively retain the material (Nilson, 2010). They can also provide the instructor with valuable information about how much and how effectively students are learning. Finally, they can raise students' awareness of their own learning strategies and approaches and their cognitive processes, thus allowing students to better understand themselves as learners.

Implementation

WTL activities are versatile and can be used in various instructional settings, including university courses. As mentioned before, teachers can include them at any stage of the lesson to encourage students' active thinking about the material presented in class. For example, at the beginning of the class, WTL activities can help students review the content of the previous lesson and reflect on what they learned. Some examples of the WTL prompts that can be implemented at the beginning of the class include:

- Summarize one strategy you learned last class and explain how you will implement it in your other college classes.
- Write a note to a student (real or fictional) who missed the previous class. In your note, explain how one idea from that class is particularly important to your life/studies (Barton & Heidema, 2002).
- Write down, in one sentence, the importance or relevance of something you learned in the previous lesson (Barton & Heidema, 2002).
- Based on the assigned reading for today's class, what do you expect to learn during the lesson?
- Write one question that you have about the reading assignment for today's class. Explain how the answer to this question would help you better understand today's lesson material.

In the middle of the lesson, WTL activities encourage students to stay focused and promote their active participation. Here are a few examples of how a WTL activity can be incorporated in the middle of the lesson:

- The teacher pauses the lecture or the explanation of the material at the key juncture and asks students to predict in writing what they believe will happen next.
- After presenting the material or explaining a particular concept of the lesson, the teacher can ask students to write a question they may still have about this new material. To expand this activity, students can be asked to exchange papers and either answer the original writer's question or provide suggestions to the writer on how they can find the answer (Barton & Heidema, 2002).
- After having students complete a problem-solving strategy, the teacher can ask them to describe the strategy they used to complete the activity and explain why they used it.
- After reading a text (in a language class), the teacher can ask students to write the most interesting/important word that they learned from the reading. Students have to explain how and in which situations they will use this word.
- After completing a group activity, students will be asked to reflect on the importance of this activity.

Finally, at the end of the lesson, WTL activities can be implemented to identify what students learned during the lesson, assess their understanding of the discussed material, and encourage students to reflect on the lesson. Examples of the WTL prompts that can be implemented at the end of the class include the following:

- Imagine that you have to go home and tell your parents about today's lesson. What would you tell them?
- Imagine that you have to explain today's group activity to a little child. How would you do it?
- Tell me about your favorite activity from class today. Explain why you liked it. How can you apply what you learned in this activity in your future studies?
- What is the top single thing (e.g., strategy, concept, theory, principle) that you learned in class today? Explain why it is important/helpful/interesting to you.
- Finish the sentence: "The most difficult concept/topic/theory/strategy for me today was... because..." Explain how the teacher can help you with this difficulty.

Examples

A few examples of student responses to WTL prompts are provided below.

Example 1

Prompt

Summarize one strategy you learned last class and explain how you will implement it in your other college classes.

Student Response

One strategy that I learned last class is how to recognize the lecture language for the topic and plan, in other words, what topic the teacher will talk about during the lecture and the plans for the day. I learned that I should do this by listening very carefully for signaling words and phrases and by paying attention to the details at the beginning of the class. This will help

me in my college classes because there will be a lot of students in class, so it will be very important for me to pay attention in order to understand the topic and the plan that the professor has for the day.

Example 2

Prompt

Imagine that you have to go home and tell your parents about today's lesson. What would you tell them?

Student Response

In today's class, we learned how to write an effective lecture summary that only focuses on the main ideas and important details, so that not only I but other people will be able to understand what it is about. For example, if I was in class and my classmate didn't come and she asks me to see my notes/summary of the lecture, she needs to be able to understand the main ideas discussed during the lecture based on my summary.

Example 3

Prompt

Students were asked to reflect on the importance of a group activity.

Student Response

I liked looking at different examples of genres and discussing with my classmates the features of each piece that belong to different genres and also thinking about the audience. This activity helped me realize that each type of writing has individual characteristics, and if we want to think about the effectiveness of each piece, we have to consider the genre and audience. For example, we didn't think that the journal article was effective, and we thought it was boring, but we didn't think about the audience! It was a very interesting activity.

Letters to the Reviewer

Description

When it comes to teaching writing, research suggests that students should be actively involved in the revision process by reflecting on and analyzing their writing and meaningfully responding to teacher feedback (e.g., Shvidko, 2015; Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Haneda, 2004; Hewings & Coffin, 2006; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997). By being engaged in the systematic analysis of their drafts, students become more attentive and reflective readers. To this end, in my writing courses, I implement a technique called *Letter to the Reviewer* that facilitates collaboration between the teacher and the student (Shvidko, 2015). A *Letter to the Reviewer* is a memo that students attach to each draft, in which they provide a short reflective note to their Reviewer (e.g., their teacher or peer) by identifying several strengths and weaknesses of their draft and asking for specific feedback on certain elements of the draft.

Implementation

Since I follow a multi-draft approach in my writing courses, students are asked to compose a *Letter to the Reviewer* for each draft they submit. Each letter has a distinct focus. That is, for the first letter (on the first draft), students are encouraged to focus on the “big picture” elements (sometimes called “higher-order concerns”), including development, content, and organization. To help students reflect on their drafts and compose the letters, I provide them with a list of guiding questions:

- What are the strengths of your draft?
- What are the weaknesses of your draft?
- Does the draft have sufficient support or does it lack support?
- Is the organization of the paper effective? Briefly explain.
- What part of the draft is in most need of further work?
- What would you like your reader to pay close attention to while reading your draft?
- Are you expecting feedback on any particular elements of your draft? If so, what are they?

The second *Letter to the Reviewer* should briefly identify the changes that were made based on the feedback students received on the first draft. Students may also request feedback on lexical and syntactic problems (sometimes called “lower-order concerns”), such as word choice and sentence structure, as well as mechanics and documentation of sources (if applicable). The guiding questions they can use while composing their letters include the following:

- Briefly identify the major revisions that you have made in this draft based on the feedback that you received from your teacher and your classmate.
- What difficulties did you encounter while revising this draft? What was the most challenging part of revising this draft?
- What makes this draft stronger than the first one?
- In what ways does this revised draft better fulfill the purpose of the assignment than the first draft?
- What parts of this revised draft still need further work? Identify specific problems that you feel need to be addressed.
- Are there any particular places in your draft you want your reader to pay close attention to?
- Are there any language concerns (e.g., grammar, word choice) that you would like your reader to help you with?

In their last *Letter to the Reviewer*, submitted with the final draft, students are encouraged to evaluate the overall effectiveness of their paper and identify the major changes that were made based on the feedback they received both from the teacher and their classmates (if applicable) throughout the process of working on the paper. Students may use the following questions as guidelines:

- Briefly identify the major revisions that you have made while composing this final draft.
- What difficulties did you encounter while working on this paper?
- What makes this final draft stronger than the previous ones?
- What are the major strengths of this final draft?
- Are there any weaknesses in this draft you want your reader to be aware of?

The above questions can be adjusted for courses where students only submit a single (i.e., final) paper of a writing assignment. The main point to keep in mind here is to give students a chance to analyze and reflect on their written product, identify the areas for improvement and, based on that, request feedback from the reader on these areas of their writing.

My observations of student work and students' self-reports on this technique demonstrated that these letters help students approach their own writing more analytically, ask the teacher and peers for focused feedback, engage in the collaborative revision process, provide more specific feedback on their classmates' writing during peer review activities, and recognize the connection between classroom instruction and their own writing.

Examples

Below are some examples of students' *Letters to the Reviewer*:

Example 1

Dear Reviewer,

This is my first draft of Assignment 2. I followed the instructions in the course packet and tried my best to extend the content of each graph, so I think this first draft does not lack information and reasoning. However, my reasoning sometimes could be illogical, for example, the two references in the first two paragraphs. I tried to evaluate the point from the second reference so that the paragraph could be read more logically, but I think I failed. Another problem is the transitional words. I tried some new words and phrases and it was awesome, but there were still many repeatedly used words. I will try to fix it. The last and the biggest problem is my procedure part and the purpose part. The last sentence makes me feel a kind of opposite to my research target, and I think this could cause trouble for my research. I would like to receive feedback on the content of these two sections of my paper: procedure and purpose. I also want to know if I used transitional words effectively.

Sincerely,

(Student Name)

Example 2

Dear Reviewer,

In this second draft of the interview report, I have added most of the additional information the last draft was missing as this time I actually had the data from the interview. One hard part of this draft was coding. It took me a while but I figured out the coding scheme to organize my findings. This draft is definitely better than the previous draft due to the changes I made to the content. However, even though this draft is better, there is still room for improvement. For example, I would like you to give me feedback on the analysis section. Did I present the procedure correctly? I am also not sure if I used direct quotations effectively. Could you please comment on that as well? Do I need to provide more quotations from the interview? I hope I will get constructive feedback from you so that my next writing will be of better quality.

Sincerely,

(Student Name)

Example 3

Dear Reviewer,

In this argumentative paper, I wrote my claim about nitrogen fixation fertilizer. I chose to give a counterclaim first, and then use my own claim to counter it. I believe that using this way to present my point is more convincing. My paper has the strength of being convincing, but also, I think it has the weakness of being unorganized. Before I started to write this paper, I was planning to develop two counterclaims. But in the end, I could only develop one. I think I need to have more logical organizing in the next draft. Could you please tell me if my organization is good and if it makes sense to the reader? Do you think I need to find more evidence to support my claim? Finally, I would like to know if I should add another counterclaim. I appreciate your suggestions!

Sincerely,

(Student Name)

Conclusion

Writing is a powerful tool that can be used in the classroom to facilitate students' reflection both on the course material (e.g., projects, assignments, and feedback) and their own learning processes. Reflective writing tasks, therefore, can give students the opportunity to think more critically and carefully about the material presented in the course and to learn more about themselves—their learning strengths and weaknesses as well as progress made in the course. Due to their versatility, the reflective writing tasks described above can be implemented in various teaching contexts and adjusted depending on the nature of the course, the material presented in it, and the learner population. Using these examples above, teachers can also design their own reflective writing tasks to create opportunities for students to reflect on their learning and the knowledge they acquire in their courses. It is my hope that the reflective tasks described here will help teachers include more reflective components in their own courses.

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