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## REFLECTIVE JOURNALING: METASTRATEGY OF EFL ONLINE CLASSES AT UNIVERSITIES

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**Purpose.** The purpose of the paper was to study the reflective journaling in online EFL classes utilized in higher education establishments, to analyse the data providing the outline of its theoretical and practical aspects, and to assess the effectiveness of the students' post-class online reflective journaling.

**Methods:** literature analysis, statistical analysis, interviews and polls, synthesis, deduction, generalization.

**Results.** The data review outlined the considerable level of attention paid by both the Ukrainian and foreign scientific circles to the issue of the post-class reflection exercised by educators towards learners. The positive effect of the reflective method introduction into the diverse disciplines and forms of teaching them was noticed. Based on the outcomes of the research performed, reflection splits into a self-reflection (when a student perceives their own progress) and a teacher-guided reflection (when a student perceives their own progress through the teachers' feedback). Both types of reflection help learners realise their weaknesses and find motivation for further advancement. The post-class reflective journaling can be applied for detection of the following:

- a) the level of knowledge acquired;
- b) possible gaps in a topic;

- c) possible difficulties while learning a topic;
- d) request for help;
- e) directions for improvement;
- f) psychological issues with perception;
- g) recommendations.

The procedure of reflective journaling is recommended to be introduced in post-class activities and is attributed the status of a regular activity which presupposes filling in a special form (questionnaire, diary, Google forms, special tools of university designed platforms for distance learning, etc.) that can either be a universal standard or vary depending on a discipline type.

**Keywords:** EFL classes, online learning, reflection, reflective journaling, self-actualization.

## Introduction

The Covid-19 quarantine measures have led to numerous changes in people's lifestyle worldwide giving remote education particular importance. The necessity of accepting and adapting to the previously unexperienced realities functions as a prerequisite for launching numerous researches aiming at crystallizing the set of the most effective methods and techniques of EFL teaching as well as learning. Grounding on the fact that among the available studies there is a considerable lack of those covering the problems of education provided remotely during 2020 and 2021, thus the issue stays vulnerable and requires some innovative approaches. Remote EFL classes are related to numerous drawbacks and challenges ranging from bad sound or/and video quality during the classes to the absence of psychological interaction between an educator and a learner. The latter may experience poor academic performance, demotivation, psychological burn-out, misunderstandings, and can lead to conflicts. The participants of the education process are to adapt to the new Internet-dependent learning reality that has made the author go deeper and research the undergraduates' metacognitive abilities and benefits of reflective journaling, which turns out to shape a leading factor of personal improvement in online EFL classes. The student's self-reflection, as well as the teacher-guided reflection, helps learners realise their weaknesses and find motivation for further advancement.

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Having access to students' comments of such type, an educator can adjust the learning process to real students' needs, to provide support, and to diagnose the vulnerable matters. The author suggests that various reflective journaling exercises (e.g. feedbacks, comments, "call for action", motivation letters, e-mails "from you in previous study term to you this study term," etc.) may positively affect the quality of the learning process in general and students' academic achievements in particular. Furthermore, the new approach aided in correcting the classes' structure and altering the teaching style, which proved to be beneficial.

**Purpose.** The purpose of the paper was to research the data providing the outline of theoretical and practical aspects of reflective learning metastategy; to shape the own comprehension of the notion and method; to study the reflective journaling in online EFL classes utilized in higher education establishments; to assess the effectiveness of the students' post-class online reflective journaling activities.

**Methods.** Several methods were applied. The overview of the data available, its synthesis and analysis allowed the author to determine the blank spaces existing in the research of the issue, furthermore, the spots that required specific attention were identified. On the one hand, the method of statistical analysis aided with the Statistica 17.0 software enabled the author to collect and summarise the tendencies distinguished while conducting the interviews and polls with learners, concerning their attitudes towards the reflective journaling exercises, and on the other hand, it made the comparison of the study terms results transparent and thus fixed the effective ways to improve the quality of the learning process. The method of generalization turned out to be particularly useful for summing up the research results and making conclusions.

## Literature review

The search for innovative methods of EFL teaching has been carried out for years, but the issue of the students' metacognition, self-reflection, or teacher-guided reflection, is relatively new as it got its popularity within the last 20 years. So, some authors merely study all ways which may improve the teachers' methods and techniques (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991) or introduction of innovative teaching methods (Saodat, 2020), while the others concentrate on the students' learning strategies developed through the learning diaries (Halbacj, 2000). The study of the students' interaction skills using post-classes questionnaires (Lymar, 2020) and the research of their motivation (Al-Tamimi, Shuob, 2009) through reflective technologies explain self-encouragement for further practical actions on learning and professional growth, which is possible by the students' interviews, questionnaires, and polls. Several scientists offer to use the students' diaries for correction of the teachers' methods and classes structures (Tang, 2002), the entire educational system (Dubinsky, 2006) or the teachers' self-perfection (Cowan, 2006). Gattegno regards an important issue of the teacher's self-perfection as a method of improving the students' knowledge quality (2010). The other authors study the students' reflection as a component of the educational process emphasising its importance (Breyer, 2009), especially the benefits of the reflection diaries that lead to the students self-reflection (Klimova, 2015). Several scientists regard the reflection of students within the context of learning English, particularly written (or academic) one (Khongput, 2020 and Porto, 2007). Besides, classical exercises, offered by the educators to make students reflect together with the social media service, are also widely covered by authors as a means of reflection and studying English (Mynard, 2008). The other authors offer a combined advantage of the students' reflection, as it improves not only the students' motivation and metacognitive abilities but the teachers' methods too (Thu, 2020). Yesilbursa provides a detailed analysis of the reflection introduced in the classroom, depicts also possible drawbacks for both the tutor and a student, and gives recommendations on how to avoid problems (2011). Nonetheless, most authors agree on the idea that reflection is rather positive for any educational process, and well-organized reflection exercises will be to the benefits of both students and their educators, particularly of the language, regarding its nature. It contributes to the metacognitive competence development with a better understanding of the learning process, training strategies, and communication (Demydovych, 2019). The metacognitive reflection is studied as an internal process of analysis and synthesis of a certain trend or direction, chosen

by a particular student (a group of students) or a teacher, which leads to perception of one's study results, external and internal motivation, self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses, altering learning and teaching methods, and making corrections where necessary.

### **Author's experience**

The introduction of online EFL classes in spring 2020 at Ukrainian universities was forced and unexpected for the educators who were not used to working remotely with big groups. The participants of the education process faced numerous difficulties which could be classified into three main groups:

- technical (related to limited or no access to the Internet, inappropriate Internet connection, poor level of devices necessary for online classes (like systemic errors which prevented the device from switching on their cameras, etc.), sound problems, search for suitable platforms and tools for video conferences, etc.);
- psychological (related to the absence of live interaction between students and teachers (students and students, students and teachers, teachers and teachers), no or limited eye contact, inability to keep concentration for a long time dealing with, first of all, devices, then people, the feeling of isolation, even depression, etc.);
- educational (related to the urgent necessity of new ways of delivering lectures, new types of activities, exercises, assignments, visualization tools; special training sessions aimed at helping teachers go deeper in their knowledge of online educational possibilities, etc.).

Having in mind the quality of the courses delivered, the importance of accepting and adapting to the new reality, improving communication and interaction, identifying the drawbacks in online classes, and making relevant alteration, the author decided to try the students' reflective journaling method – periodic post-class answers for the same questions through the whole course:

- 1) What have I learnt in this class?
- 2) What gaps in knowledge, skills, and abilities have I found?

- 3) What do I have to do (learn, read, watch, attend, write) to improve my understanding of the learnt theme?
- 4) What kind of help do I need?
- 5) What emotions did I have while learning a theme (or doing a particular activity)?

Alternative tasks were rarely offered: self-motivation letters, e-mails “from you in previous study term to you this study term”, feedback or list of recommendations, etc. The students had to submit their answers in English as a part of their home assignment for the next class through the Distedu (the platform for distant learning used in National University of “Kyiv-Mohyla Academy”).

Completing the task served several functions: improving students’ English fluency and writing skills (the learners knew their answers would not be graded in case of errors), developing metacognition, creative and critical thinking, increasing self-confidence, and decreasing the level of fear for making mistakes, etc. The educator got the possibility not only to track every single student’s progress, but to know about their emotions, preferred learning activities, or difficulties, consequently, to make changes in the classes structure and to provide needed support. It should be mentioned that only the teacher could access students’ journals and leave some feedback when it was requested. The tutor applied the reflective journaling practice in EFL classes from September 2020 to May 2021. While carrying out the experiment with 60 participants from the first year of university studies of different specialities, such as law, social science, social technologies, and IT, the author pursued several goals:

1. Teaching the students to express their thoughts and write well-structured paragraphs in English, which will eventually be estimated during the current and final tests;
2. Monitoring primarily such grammar issues as word order, verb tenses, sequence of tenses, singular/plural forms, adjectives/adverbs’ degrees of comparison etc., aiming at spotting the gaps existing in the previously gained knowledge;
3. Prompting the students’ ability to self-actualization and self-reflection that might contribute to improved quality of learning and overall academic achievements;
4. Adjusting the learning process and classes structure to the reported in reflective journals learners’ needs, skills, abilities, and preferences;

5. Making the learners involved in planning and creating mutually beneficial classes, establishing collectively the rules to follow, thus sharing the responsibility for the achievement and discipline;
6. Improving communication, interaction, and collaboration between the teacher and students.

So, the general results of the method's usage in EFL classes would be beneficial for students' academic achievements.

## Results

The author obtains the following results:

1. Continuous written reflection about the progress, challenges, and emotional state led to improvement of the students' writing skills. The essay-like comments showed a strong pattern of progression, when the first ones lacked structure, coherence, and grammar order, the final ones appeared to be significantly better in vocabulary choice, grammar patterns, structure, and content. The results of every next current or final test showed an increase in the English language fluency with the reduction of the number of grammar mistakes by one-third (particularly regarding the Verb Tenses, Prepositions and Conditional sections). It was detected that after eight months of the English classes, which included the post-class reflective journaling exercises, the total achievements were increased by 5%, understanding of the theme of "verb tenses" was improved by almost 25%, "word order" – by 21%.

2. Students' self-actualization was expressed in emphasizing the themes and activities, which were admitted to be difficult, and further meaningful work with the weaknesses, altogether, led to the improvement of total academic achievement results. Thus, no student got an unsatisfactory grade; the percentage of the students with grades B and C at the end of the course increased by 15 and 20% respectively compared to results in the first term of studies.

3. Reflective journaling activity partly helped to overcome difficulties with the assessment of students' class participation that was obligatory according to the course requirements. At the Internet-dependent video conferencing, some failures used to occur regularly, and it would not be fair to punish students for any

force-majeures issues they could not manage. Therefore, reflective journaling could compensate unsatisfactory learners' participation caused by technical problems or even their absence during synchronous meetings with the teacher. The obtained asynchronously knowledge could be demonstrated and graded in post-class comments.

4. The analysis of the students' reflections in journals allowed the author to identify drawbacks in the online learning process, to react and make changes immediately in class structures or even curriculum, to provide appropriate support, to apply an individual approach to every student. Although reading reflective journals was a time-consuming activity for the tutor, awareness of the situation on the other side of the screen stimulated the teachers' professional growth.

### **Discussion of the results**

The positive effect of the reflective journaling method introduction into the diverse disciplines and forms of teaching them was noticed. Based on the outcomes of the research performed, reflection splits into a self-reflection (when a student perceives their own progress) and a teacher-guided reflection (when a student perceives their own progress through the teachers' feedback). The procedure of reflective journaling is recommended to be introduced in post-class activities and attributed to the status of a regular activity, which presupposes filling in a special form (questionnaire, diary, Google forms, special tools of university platforms for distance learning, etc.), that can either be a universal standard or vary depending on a discipline type. The author regards the implementation of the reflective learning metastrategy as a successful one, which resulted in improved academic achievement. If analysed separately, all the stages of the experiment were beneficial for both the educator and the learners. Regular reflective journaling mastered the vocabulary and grammar usage together with training the writing skills. It is worth noting that EFL classes do not include only the writing component, but the listening, reading and speaking ones, the evaluation of which resulted in grading the students' achievements. So, why did the writing drills result in overall academic improvement, even in other activities, which were not trained by reflection journaling exercises?

The continuous personal metacognitive work might serve a crucial role together with self-actualization (both learners' and educators'). The reflection journaling exercises taught students to analyse the course themes, to find out their weaknesses



in knowledge and abilities, to identify gaps that require more attention, and, finally, to become more determined in the studies, taking the responsibility for the results onto themselves. The shift from the pattern *“an educator must teach me, and I will learn what he/she teaches”* to the new one *“I am taught and I learn whatever I need and whatever I lack during synchronous or asynchronous classes”* resulted in a higher level of self-discipline, learning maturity, and motivation of the students. As a result, the question of receiving an unsatisfactory grade was not even considered in the study term, as the students were highly interested in personal and professional growth. Regular monthly rewards from the teacher for the best reflection, the possibility to compete and to read the comments of peers (without mentioning the students' names and groups) stimulated the learners to perform better next time. The author suggests that the outcomes of filling in the reflection form contributed to conscious learning that meant students' deeper understanding of what they study, why they study, and how they study. The learner as a main figure of the education process managed the learning, with the tutor being a powerful tool in student-driven learning. That fact led to another perception of the educator's primary roles giving priority to an educator as a planner of the education process, manager, instructor, facilitator, mentor, coach, not a teacher. Therefore, the students' reflective journaling practice helped the participants of the learning experiment reassess the university studies, adjust to online classes and get their academic benefits in the hard times caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

### Conclusions

When the modern world faced all the quarantine and lockdown difficulties and the remote mode of education process turned from a previously optional issue to current compulsory reality, traditional teaching methods at higher education establishments had to be transformed to keep students involved and motivated in making academic progress. Reflective journaling exercises have proved their effectiveness as they potentially:

- a) ease teacher-student communication in the non-stable virtual environment;
- b) improve students' metacognitive and self-actualization abilities;
- c) track the learning process and thus help educators and learners adapt quicker to current needs and available possibilities;
- d) identify strengths and weaknesses;
- e) master creativity and critical thinking patterns;
- f) eliminate the fear of making mistakes;

- g) enforce confidence;
- h) improve students' academic achievements.

Both self-reflection and teacher-guided reflection (which gradually is transforming into self-reflection) result in breaking the psychological and linguistic barriers by learners. The improvement of academic achievements by 15-20% have been staying for an eight-month term. The results are supposed to be even better after a longer period of journaling practice, as the adaptation of the first-year students to university life in September needed some time and efforts. Judging by the results obtained after the first year full of uncertainty and questions, the reflective journaling proved to be worth being implemented into university courses.

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