

# EXPLORATIONS

## A Practical Exploration of Learner Reflections in Communicative English Classes

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My first practical encounter with student reflections came when I started working at a new university in 2016. This university prioritised both student autonomy and reflective practice. When I began teaching at the university, they informed me that students in many classes wrote learning journals. At first, this seemed like a good idea but something that would be time-consuming and impractical. However, as these activities were generally well-scheduled into the curriculum, I was excited to try something new. I found that, firstly, these reflections became an integral part of students' learning and were not only reflections on what they learned; students still needed to employ the grammar patterns they had assimilated and explore new vocabulary to express their ideas. In addition, learners became more adept at expressing their opinions in English. Finally, these reflections enabled students to generate their own ideas about how to employ learning strategies to improve their performance. Therefore, I was quickly sold on the process and made student reflections an integral part of my teaching. However, the practice was indeed time-consuming for me as the teacher, and this must also have been true for the students. Thus, one of the challenges became how to maintain the benefits of reflective practice while streamlining the process. As such, after reviewing some of the benefits of student

reflections, the article will explore my experimentations in creating an effective and time-efficient method of using student reflections.

### The Importance of High-Quality Student Reflection

Studies such as those of Alterio (2004) and Porto (2007) have argued that students do not naturally reflect on their learning, tending to focus on the ultimate outcome rather than the effectiveness of their learning strategies. Having students consider their learning experiences can help develop this insight. There are numerous ways to approach reflective practice, such as learning journals, student diaries, action logs or any combination of these approaches (Burton & Carroll, 2001; Hooper, 2022; Peachey, n.d.). There is a substantial overlap between these methods, and what they all have in common is that students reflect on some aspect of their lessons or learning activities. The reflection does not have to be written; it could be an audio or video, for example. The important point is that students examine and document their learning regularly, preferably with a teacher or mentor providing feedback on their ruminations.

Student reflections can improve students' ability to gauge their strengths and weaknesses, and thus, they are more effective at appraising, planning and targeting their efforts (Fedderholdt, 1998). According to Murphey (1993), this type of analysis can nudge students toward a more active learning style, leading to a better understanding of freshly acquired knowledge

and the learning process in general (p. 7). Moreover, the learning journals can give students some input into future lesson structure and class management, facilitating feelings of empowerment, involvement, and positivity toward the class. Matsumoto (1989) highlighted how this kind of positive attitude toward classmates, teachers and native speakers could improve learner outcomes through increased motivation (p. 187).

Furthermore, teachers can use student journals or reflections to help improve lessons and classroom activities. For example, Miyake-Warkentin et al. (2020) used a type of reflection called “action logging”, where students evaluate classroom activities in notebooks, which are read later by the teacher (pp. 342–343). The study found that a focus on struggling students had led to dissatisfaction in the more able class members. As students felt empowered to express their opinions through the action logs, this issue could be quickly identified and rectified. Hooper (2022) found that action logs could raise awareness of “under the radar” issues (p. 1040); these are small points that students might not feel willing to raise in class, such as requesting more homework reviews, longer periods to complete in-class tasks or further examples of language points. This issue is illustrated in a more narrative style by Matsumoto (1989), who described how a Japanese student on a study abroad program in the United States kept a daily journal about her learning experiences (pp. 175–175). The student voiced some frustration with the more playful communicative language classes she attended, which starkly contrasted with the grammar-translation teaching she had experienced in Japan. In this example, the teacher would have the option to add more formal grammar instruction or to just monitor the situation and treat it as a challenging yet necessary transition for a learner adapting to a new teaching style. In either case, the journaling practice facilitates insight into the thoughts driving student affect and allows

the teacher to discuss the issue with the student if necessary.

As outlined above, the literature describes numerous benefits of student reflections. Yet, there is still a question about how to actually implement such a project with a class of students. I have explored this issue extensively since being convinced of the utility of student reflections. Therefore, this paper will now outline my experience of using the process over many years.

### [An Implementation of Weekly Reflections in University Speaking and Listening Classes](#)

The following is a practical example of how I introduced and developed learner reflections in university classes of first-year English majors. Each class had between 15 to 24 members and met four times a week for 90 minutes. All the class members used electronic devices and had access to Wi-Fi. This access enabled students to complete their reflections electronically. The process could be managed on paper using a notebook, but I found the process to be smoother using electronic submission. Students submitted their reflections as a Google Doc using Google Classroom. Then, I was able to review, comment and return the reflections quickly and efficiently.

#### The learner reflection template

I gave students the learning reflection template in the first week of lessons. The document contained a number of questions about students’ language learning. The questions guided students to reflect on their learning during the past week, focusing on things such as their high points, challenges and English use, as Figure 1 shows.

Figure 1

*Weekly learner reflection*

Weekly Reflection
<b>How were classes this week?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you feel this week?</li> <li>• How much English did you use?</li> <li>• Did you learn anything useful?</li> </ul>
<b>What is something you did this week that you are proud of?</b>
<b>What is one thing you want to do better or improve next week? What steps can you take to make an improvement or solve the problem?</b>
<b>What is the best word/quotation/idea you learned this week?</b>
<small>(Optional) Is there anything else you want to tell Denver? For example, you can ask a question, tell a story, make a comment about class, etc.</small>

I developed the content from a template used at my university by rewriting the original questions and adding sections three and four. When I first introduced the reflection, students provided feedback on each lesson and then submitted it once a week. The comments on each lesson were valuable in understanding the effectiveness of specific activities and facilitating refinements. However, the daily reflections proved demanding for students and myself, as Miyake-Warkentin et al. (2020) also reported, so I switched to weekly reflections instead. I also gave students a completed example reflection to illustrate the tone and content previous students had used (Figure 2).

Figure 2

*Completed example weekly reflection*

Weekly Reflection
<b>How were classes this week?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you feel this week?</li> <li>• How much English did you use?</li> <li>• Did you learn anything useful?</li> </ul>
I felt pretty good but I was tired sometimes and it was sometimes difficult to concentrate on Zoom meetings. I would like more time to talk with my classmates and practice English.
We made our final videos for our project. It was fun but tiring. I enjoyed helping my partner make her video. I learned how to pronounce better and I got a lot of speaking practice.
I worked well but I want to increase my English use to 100%!!!! Good luck to me!!!! I can try harder to speak English and I want to ask more questions in class.
<b>What is something you did this week that you are proud of?</b>
Free conversation area. I went 3 times this week! It was a lot of fun. I made some new friends and learned some funny English words.
Talking to new people in English. It was difficult but I felt good after.
<b>What is one thing you want to do better or improve next week? What steps can you take to make an improvement or solve the problem?</b>
Using 100% English. I want to participate more in group discussions. I will try to speak first in the next discussion so I will have to say something.
<b>What is the best word/quotation/idea you learned this week?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pat on the back</li> <li>• Orientation</li> <li>• To cut a long story short</li> <li>• Tryna</li> <li>• Complicated</li> </ul>
<small>(Optional) Is there anything else you want to tell Denver? For example, you can ask a question, tell a story, make a comment about class, etc.</small>
What is your favourite Japanese food?

I distributed the template (Figure 1) at the end of the first lesson each week. Learners had to complete their reflection before the start of the following week. I wanted to ensure students completed the reflection, which is why I avoided time-consuming questions about grammar and focused on relationship-building and learning strategies. One key question for students, I believe, was for them to estimate the amount of English they used in class. This inclusion helped learners consider how their English use affected their speaking progress. The reflection also made students document evidence of their language learning accomplishments, which likely increased their motivation. Moreover, learners had to specify how they could improve their performance, highlighting potential gains and improving the outcomes of those motivated to make the necessary changes.

Upon reflection, I did want to add a more targeted language-learning element to the template, so I included the section for vocabulary. I informed the learners that this should be language they had discovered

outside of our class so that it would be new knowledge for their classmates. This language was collected, compiled, and studied together as a class using the vocabulary application Quizlet. Students learned a new list of words each week, using the games and features of the application, and then took a weekly quiz. This practice reinforced the principle of students learning from each other, which was an essential facet of these classes.

In the reflection, there was also space for students to ask me questions or to make general comments. Students often asked about my favourite things or past experiences, wrote about their plans/activities for the weekend, and asked for specific advice on language issues. This feature provided an excellent opportunity to get to know the students in a low-pressure, relaxed manner. The section often allowed students to find common connections with me as their teacher and regularly started conversations in the document that we could continue in the classroom. This feature gave students a natural way to interact in English on topics of interest to them.

### Student Completion and Teacher Management of the Learner Reflection

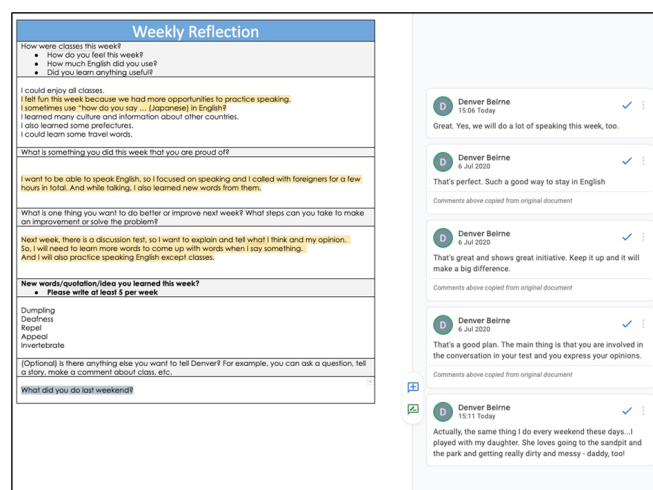
As Peachey (n.d.) found when employing this kind of journaling, there was always a small minority of students who were less keen on this activity and only wrote the bare minimum or failed to submit the report entirely. This was the student's decision, as the activity had been created to enable students to help themselves. Yet, it was always crucial to attempt to incentivise as many learners as possible to complete any tasks with pedagogical merit. Formally grading submissions could have provided extrinsic motivation to complete tasks (Deci et al., 1999; Pulfrey et al., 2013), but I believed this would have been too time-consuming and unnecessarily rigid. Another issue affecting time efficiency was whether to correct students' writing. Initially,

I corrected the grammar mistakes to motivate students with the goal of improving their work. However, this was also time-consuming and risked students' prioritising grammatically correct sentences over honestly expressing their feelings.

Thus, I needed to find a way to streamline the process and keep students motivated to complete the task over the whole semester. I had already implemented a class points system where tasks I did not grade were awarded points that contributed to students' class participation grades. I found that awarding points helped incentivise more students to submit the reflections consistently. Finally, instead of correcting grammar, I focused on giving comments of encouragement and support. I told students that I would only write detailed advice when specifically requested. I tried to keep the comments as positive as possible because, as Matsumoto (1989) points out, positive feedback from the teacher can lead to improved student affect and self-motivation. Figure 3 shows an example of teacher feedback.

Figure 3

### Weekly reflection with teacher comments



In practice, I usually reviewed the journals before classes on Monday mornings, which took between one and two hours. Then, the new templates were issued after

Monday's lesson. Even though I didn't correct the grammar, the process could still be time-consuming if not managed carefully. Therefore, I would quite strictly limit the review period to this slot before classes. Consequently, students knew they would routinely receive their reviewed reflections on Monday mornings.

Once again, due to time commitments, I concentrated on using the reflections with the classes most focused on communicative English skills, which were the Freshman English classes. Students on this course were new to the university and, for the first time in their language learning journey, were expected to speak 100% English in language lessons. Learners in this program needed a comfortable, supportive atmosphere and plenty of encouragement to challenge themselves continually to remain in English for 90-minute lessons. The reflections helped learners express these challenges, share their successes, and seek advice in a safe, supported environment.

### Introduction of speaking diaries/reflections

The written reflections were fostering student-teacher relationships and encouraging a comfortable learning environment as I understood more about my students through this process. However, these classes were focused on speaking and listening, so I believed the activity could be improved by having students reflect verbally on their learning. With all the other challenges facing first-year students, though, I thought it would have been too demanding for them to complete a weekly spoken learning reflection in English from the start of Semester 1. Therefore, I decided to have students do a written reflection in Semester 1 and a spoken video reflection in Semester 2. Before implementing the system, I trialled the video reflections with a cohort of first-year students by asking them to complete a video diary over the summer vacation. Students had often mentioned that their speaking ability atrophied over the

holiday period as they did not get opportunities to speak English; hence, this activity could also help students maintain some regular English output over the holidays.

All the students could complete the task without issue, so the weekly reflection activity was likely to be straightforward. Essentially, the weekly reflections were just transferred from the written form to the spoken form. Students recorded themselves using the video function on their smartphones or iPads, answering the questions from the weekly reflection template in around 1 minute. Students uploaded the video, following the same schedule used for written reflections. Learners added the new vocabulary items straight into a shared Google Doc. Figure 4 shows an example of the assignment.

Figure 4

### Weekly speaking reflection assignment and shared vocabulary

The image shows two screenshots from a Google Classroom assignment. The left screenshot is titled "Week 13 (Semester 2) - Weekly Reflections" and contains instructions for a 10-point video diary task. The right screenshot is titled "Semester 2 Weekly Vocabulary" and shows a table with columns for "Word" and "Definition". The table lists various words and their meanings, such as "include / loads / bits and bobs / feel out / fix / make fun of" and "be wary / don't ever / ready / fixed / badass".

Word	Definition
include / loads / bits and bobs / feel out / fix / make fun of	
engage / grow / force / headstrong / not / do / do / do / do / do	
achieve / complete / finish / win / reward / probably / lost	
admirable / arteries / subtle / story arc / exposition / shepherd	
merge / cue / commences / sustain / subtle / answer for / call of / do	
comparable / pulse / fix / minute / artery / phonology / vocal chords	
be wary / don't ever / ready / fixed / badass	
take / value / vessel / compare / intrude	
dependent / vocal / high / opportunity / habits	
go viral / naive / obedient / agile / offset / report on	
drawn / condemn / have / index / expenditure / reap / here / being	
Alveolar ridge / hard palate / velum / tip of the tongue / blade of the tongue / mid / hard / alveolar / alveolar / alveolar	
philosopher's stone / naive / pulse / biblical / temple	
Go out of your way / blast / outlier / clear headed / super needle	
board of / adult / vote	
doing / comprehensible / informative / comprehensive / vocal / out / retro /	
MID-TEMPO - MOTIVATED - EMPHASIS - BEHIND THE SCENES - THINK OF SOMEONE	

One disadvantage of the video reflection was that it was not possible for me to post comments directly on the relevant sections of the reflections. In addition, I still posted the comments as written text rather than video, which might have seemed at odds with the students' video submissions. I could have recorded a video responding to the students' reflections, and applications such as Flip could have simplified the process somewhat. However, I decided it was better to keep the activity contained within

Google Classroom as the students' central hub for materials. Thus, I used the comments section of Google Classroom, which could also facilitate quick replies to feedback, and this often generated student-teacher interactivity. Moreover, as Murphey (1993) points out, some students can articulate themselves more clearly in writing (p. 7), and the use of written comments kept this avenue open.

Overall, I believed the advantages of the video reflections outweighed the disadvantages; the students gained extra speaking practice, delivering short semi-prepared monologues; this is a skill they would otherwise not have had the opportunity to develop. In addition, learners also practised general speaking skills such as conveying opinions and using descriptive language. Moreover, students informed me that for many of them, creating the videos was less time-consuming than writing their reflections. Finally, for me, the review and feedback process was generally more time-effective for the video reflections. Therefore, after introducing this system, I continued using it across all my freshman English classes.

### Conclusion

This paper explored how to practically implement weekly reflections in communicative university language classes. This method focused on building teacher-student relationships to foster an open learning environment to enable learners to practice English without embarrassment or fear. Overall, I gained a deeper understanding of my students. I learned about their language issues, but also

their personalities and, in some cases, the emotional, circumstantial or environmental challenges that might be affecting their mood, behaviour or class performance. These were valuable insights into the issues influencing my students and, more generally, students learning English in Japanese universities. I believe this process also made many students more willing to seek help or ask questions as a result of this additional channel of communication.

The advantages of this kind of activity depend upon the focus of the reflection; for instance, in my exploration of learner reflections, the benefits were that I came to know and understand my students more deeply, as the questions were structured to investigate this area. Alternatively, I could have created questions that reviewed classroom activities or checked students' language understanding, and then the advantages would have been quite different. Reflections can be deployed in various alternative ways to suit different learning environments, instructors' goals, and students' needs. I have outlined one way teachers could apply this process; however, it might not be appropriate for all readers. Nonetheless, I hope the description of student reflections' benefits has been persuasive and might encourage some educators to explore how they can apply the practice in their own unique situations. Through my experience, though, I have come to believe that an effective implementation of student reflections will likely be a joint student-teacher exploration where the instructor is flexible enough to adapt to the journey as it unfolds.

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