Reflection as a Tool for Improving English Language Skills at the Tertiary Level

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Abstract

This research paper explores the effectiveness of reflection as a tool for improving English language skills at the tertiary level. This skill is often overlooked for teaching language skills, but studies have shown positive outcomes to their implementation in professional career advancements. The study was conducted among students at a local university who were enrolled in English language courses at the diploma and degree levels. The data were collected through questionnaires after implementing reflection activities in two diploma classes and a degree class after a 14-week semester. The findings of the study revealed that reflection has a significant impact on improving English language skills at the tertiary level. This suggests that educators should incorporate reflective practices in their teaching strategies to enhance the learning outcomes of students.

Keywords: reflection, English language skills, tertiary level, teaching strategies

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

In recent years, the English language has become an essential tool for communication in various fields, including education, business, and social interaction. As such, it is essential for students to develop strong English language skills to succeed in their academic and professional endeavors. However, it is not easy to master a new language as this requires more than just memorizing grammar rules and vocabulary. In fact, mastering a language involves developing practical communication skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. One practical approach for improving English language skills is through reflection.

Reflection is a process of thinking deeply or meditating about one's experiences, actions, and thoughts to gain insight and improve performance (Colley et al., 2012). This means that the act of reflecting involves critical thinking and self-evaluation, which are essential components of learning. Indeed, reflection has become widely recognized as an effective tool for improving learning outcomes in various fields, including language learning. Reflection and critical thinking are essential in developing young minds for 21st-century learning and have become part of the curriculum in most education systems.

In Malaysia, critical thinking has been implemented in the Malaysian Education plan as part of 21st-century learning and innovative skills (Muhamad & Goh, 2019). This means that the 21st-century learning skills in the Malaysian education system require teachers to learn and adapt the new knowledge on how to implement critical thinking and problem-solving skills in their teaching practice. These are skills that involve reflection.

In effect, studies have shown that values are gained from implementing reflection in the classroom learning activity, and positive results have been attained to indicate their relevance. In Ayar (2023), using reflection through Vlogs helped English language learners improve their writing performance. Zafeer and Maqbool (2023) used reflection as an approach to progress learning outcomes among international graduate students' engagement, and the results were positive. Similarly, in raising the awareness of Thai English learners to Global Englishes, reflection was used in the language classroom, and the results proved positive in the aspects of language learning and use (Jindapitak et al., 2022).

1.2 Previous Studies

Reflection is a cognitive process that involves analyzing experiences and learning from them. When students apply reflection in their learning, they are not just recalling what they have learned in the lesson. Reflection involves students' ability to think deeply about what they have learned, how it makes them feel about what they have learned, and why the learning is essential to them. According to Colley et al. (2012), the ability to think critically is a necessary trait to be learned. In today's global community, it is essential to make intelligent decisions. Thinking critically must be a focus of higher education as a means to provide intellectual training for its students to participate in this on a global scale.

Several studies have supported the fact that reflection is an effective tool for improving

English language skills at the tertiary level. For example, Wang and Han (2018) conducted a study on the impact of reflection on the speaking skills of Chinese university students. The study found that reflection helped students identify their strengths and weaknesses, develop strategies for improvement, and increase their confidence in speaking English. Ayar (2023) studied the advantages of using Vlogs as a reflective tool for English language learners' writing performance. The study revealed the pedagogical trends in vlogs among ESL and EFL learners and the learners' writing competency and practices in improving their writing performance. In another study, international graduate students' engagement through journal writing as a means of reflection proved effective in tapping their learning outcomes (Zafeer & Maqbool, 2023).

Similarly, Liu and Shi (2017) investigated the impact of reflection on the writing skills of Chinese students in a tertiary institution. The study's results indicated that reflection helped students improve their writing skills by identifying errors, correcting them, and developing effective writing strategies. In Jindapitak, Teo, and Sayski (2022), Thai English Learners were asked to use reflection in their language classroom to raise their awareness of Global English. The results were positive in the aspects of language learning and use.

According to Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984), reflection plays a crucial part in the learning process. It involves four stages which are (1) concrete experience; (2) reflective observation; (3) abstract conceptualization; and (4) active experimentation. In the context of language learning, reflection involves analyzing language use, identifying areas for improvement, and developing strategies for improvement. Kolb (2014) explained that reflection is a pedagogical approach based on experiential learning where knowledge is created through transforming experience. However, experiences alone do not necessarily result in learning, as learning occurs with an active and conscious reflection of the experience.

Several factors contribute to effective learning through reflection. According to Chan and Lee (2021), reflection can influence student motivation. However, this requires commitment and hard work, whereby students need to spend time reflecting on what they have learned. Students' engagement in reflective practices also requires purposive reflection-related tasks for developing deep thinking skills (Kuswandono, 2014).

The present study, thus, aims to explore the effectiveness of reflection as a tool for improving English language skills at the tertiary level. To do this, the following objectives have been formulated to facilitate the study:

1) To determine whether reflection is effective as a tool for improving English language skills at the tertiary level.

2) To compare the perception of students from different course programs towards using reflection to enhance English language skills.

2. Methodology

Data collected were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.

The sample standard deviation is used in conjunction with the sample mean to summaries the data and were presented in descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistics shed light on the situations faced by the respondents, as the aim of the paper is to investigate students' perceptions of the effectiveness of reflection as a tool for improving English language skills at the tertiary level.

This preliminary study used primary data using convenience sampling because the lack of sampling frame. Convenience sampling is a type of non-probability sampling in which respondents have an uneven chance of being selected by a random selection procedure. The results from this study provided summaries and conclusions about the sample involved, and the results cannot be used to infer the population. An online questionnaire administered to diploma and degree students enrolled in English courses in a local institution of higher learning. Respondents were asked to rate their degree of agreement on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 suggesting strong disagreement and 5 indicating strong agreement that reflects the variables of students' appreciation of the lesson, motivation, enjoyment in learning, and reinforcement of the lesson.

For reliability analysis, Cronbach's alpha test was used to see if multiple-question Likert scale surveys are reliable. Cronbach's alpha shows that the items used in this study are reliable at about 0.973. A comparison of students' perception of reflection to enhance English language skills in the different course programs was also made based on coefficient of variation. The coefficient of variation, written as CV is a measure use under measures of dispersion when comparing distributions of different means and variances. The coefficient of variance gives the ratio of the standard deviation to the arithmetic mean expressed in percentage as in equation 1.

$$CV = \frac{s}{\bar{x}} \times 100 \tag{1}$$

where s is a sample standard deviation and $\bar{x}$ is a sample mean. The formula to find sample standard deviation is shown in equation 2.

$$s = \sqrt{\frac{1}{n-1}\left(\sum x^2 - \frac{\left(\sum x\right)^2}{n}\right)} \tag{2}$$

where $s = \sqrt{s^2}$ and the formula to find sample mean is shown in equation 3.

$$\bar{x} = \frac{\sum x}{n} = \frac{x_1 + x_2 + x_3 + \dots + x_n}{n} \tag{3}$$

where n is a number of elements in the sample.

3. Results

This section discusses the results of the study based on the research objectives respectively as follows:

1) To determine whether reflection is effective as a tool for improving English language skills at the tertiary level.

2) To compare students' perceptions of reflection to enhance English language skills in the different course programs.

3.1 Effectiveness of Reflection as a Tool for Improving English Language Skills at the Tertiary Level

The effectiveness of reflection as a tool for improving English language skills at the tertiary level was measured by means of their appreciation of the lesson, their motivation for the lesson, their enjoyment of learning, and reinforcement of the lesson. Table 1 indicates the effectiveness of reflection as a tool for improving English language skills at the tertiary level in relation to their appreciation of the lesson. In general, the mean scores for all items in this section, appreciation of the lesson, were above 4. This shows that the students feel that reflection helps them appreciate their lessons, with the top mean scores from items "Reflection on the lesson helps me appreciate the lesson better" (M = 4.43; SD = 0.712) and "Reflection on the lesson helps me remember what I have learned in the English language class" (M = 4.41; SD = 0.675). Thus, it can be concluded that reflection as a tool for improving English language skills is probably effective in relation to their appreciation of the lesson.

Table 1. Appreciation of lesson

Items	Mean	Std. deviation
Reflection on the lesson makes my English Language learning more meaningful	4.33	0.804
Reflection on the lesson helps me remember what I have learned in the English Language class.	4.41	0.675
The concepts for language skills are better understood by means of reflection on the lesson.	4.23	0.697
Reflection on the lesson helps me appreciate the lesson better.	4.43	0.712
Reflection on the lesson helps me recall the main points I learned.	4.36	0.701

Table 2 refers to motivation for the lesson as a prescription for the effectiveness of reflection as a tool for improving English language skills at the tertiary level. The mean scores for all items in this section were above 4, which indicates that students were motivated to learn from the reflection activity carried out in class. Most of the students agreed that by means of reflecting on the lesson, they were able to understand the lesson better (M = 4.29; SD = 0.701). Hence, the effectiveness of reflection as a tool for improving English language skills

can be determined through their motivation for the lesson.

Table 2. Motivation for the lesson

Items	Mean	Std. deviation
I can understand the lesson better by means of reflection on the lesson.	4.29	0.701
I am more motivated to learn by expressing my feelings during the reflection session.	4.12	0.803
I can think critically about the lesson and analyse and self-check my progress.	4.07	0.764
I like the reflection session as it allows me to open up and give my opinion or feedback about the lesson.	4.19	0.711
Since the reinforcement is impromptu at the end of the lesson where the reflection session takes place, I am compelled to pay attention in class.	4.12	0.726

Table 3 indicates the effectiveness of reflection as a tool for improving English language skills at the tertiary level by means of enjoyment in learning. In general, all items in this section had mean scores above 4 with "I think this is a good method to check if the students are paying attention in class" (M = 4.48; SD = 0.681) and "I know what I am learning and what the things I need to improve for my English from the reflection session (M = 4.40; SD = 0.708) topping the mean scores. Therefore, reflection seems to be effective in relation to students' enjoyment of learning.

Table 3. Enjoyment in learning

Items	Mean	Std. deviation
The reflection session is one of the ways to make learning fun.	4.34	0.761
I know what I am learning and what the things I need to improve for my English from the reflection session.	4.40	0.708
I can interact with my peers and lecturer through the reflection session.	4.28	0.792
I think this is a good method to check if the students are paying attention in class.	4.48	0.681
I think reflection motivates me to come to class and be more prepared to learn.	4.30	0.827

Table 4 indicates the effectiveness of reflection as a tool for improving English language skills in terms of reinforcement of the lesson. The mean scores for items in this section were all above 4, with the highest mean scores for items "The reflection session is a reminder of the assignments/homework given" (M = 4.37; SD = 0.704) and "The reflection session sums up what we have learned in the English language lesson" (M = 4.35; SD = 0.699). Thus, reflection seems effective in improving English language skills in terms of reinforcement of the lesson.

Table 4. Reinforcement of the lesson

Items	Mean	Std. deviation
I like the reflection session as I feel I am an essential part of my learning progress.	4.17	0.800
The reflection session provides an open atmosphere where I can share my feelings and thoughts.	4.19	0.775
The reflection session sums up what we have learned in the English language lesson.	4.35	0.699
The reflection session is a reminder of the assignments/homework given.	4.37	0.704
The reflection session allows me to say whether I enjoyed the lesson or otherwise.	4.27	0.758

3.2 Perception Comparison Among Programs

In this research, a comparison of students' perception of reflection to enhance English language skills in the different course programs was also made based on aspects of their appreciation of the lesson, motivation, enjoyment in learning, and reinforcement of the lesson.

Table 5. Comparison of perception of students from different course programs

Program/Course		Appreciation of lesson	Motivation	Enjoyment in learning	Reinforce the lesson
Degree in Information Management	Mean	4.46	4.30	4.56	4.40
	Std. Deviation	0.42	0.49	0.38	0.43
	Coefficient of variation (%)	9.42	11.40	8.33	9.77
Diploma in Business Studies	Mean	4.31	4.05	4.25	4.16
	Std. Deviation	0.72	0.78	0.86	0.78
	Coefficient of variation (%)	16.71	19.26	20.24	18.75
Diploma in Communication and Media	Mean	4.33	4.15	4.34	4.28
	Std. Deviation	0.63	0.63	0.62	0.62
	Coefficient of variation (%)	14.55	15.18	14.29	14.49

Table 5 shows the measure of central tendency for the different program courses in terms of appreciation of the lesson, motivation, enjoyment in learning, and reinforcement of the lesson. The mean value indicates the scale where most values in a distribution fall. The mean score provides information where on average, respondents agreed to the perception of the effectiveness of reflection as a tool for improving English language skills at the tertiary level. Regarding the coefficient of variation, respondents taking the Degree in Information Management are more consistent in their perception of the effectiveness of reflection as a tool for improving English language skills at the tertiary level regarding appreciation of lessons

(CV = 9.42), motivation (CV = 11.40), enjoyment in learning (CV = 8.33), and reinforcement of the lesson (CV = 9.77). In contrast, the coefficient of variation values shows that the respondents from Diploma in Business Studies are more dispersed compared to the other two programs involved in this study.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study found that students generally agreed that reflection is an effective tool in relation to appreciation, motivation, enjoyment, and reinforcement of lessons. Previous studies attested to this in the enhancement of writing skills and speaking skills as well as global language skills (Wang & Han, 2018; Ayar, 2023; Zafeer & Maqbool, 2023; Liu & Shi, 2017; Jindapitak et al., 2022). In the present study, reflection was used as a tool to reflect on the lesson and on how to improve the student's learning by means of self-examination of what they have learned after every lesson. The results showed that the majority of the students indeed found that using reflection to recap what they have learned helped them to appreciate the lesson better, motivated them to learn, and provided enjoyment and reinforcement of lessons. Thus, it can be concluded that reflection as a tool can prove to help improve English language skills as students, after reflecting on what they learned, were able to appreciate the lesson learned better, which motivated them positively, and learning the English language skills became a joy to them. Further, it also added to reinforcing or better remembrance of the lesson once it was recalled at the end of the lesson.

Once it was recalled at the end of the lesson.

Moreover, the comparison of students' perception of reflection to enhance English language skills in the different course programs showed that the students from the degree level were more consistent in their perception than the diploma students. This could be because the degree students were more mature and able to think deeper when applying reflection as a form of self-examination to improve their English language skills based on what had been taught in class. Hence, it can be concluded that the students from the degree level had a more consistent perception of using reflection to enhance their English language skills compared to the diploma courses. It is assumed that maturity could be a factor that influences consistency toward perception effectiveness as a tool for improving the English language.

Consequently, although reflection is commonly practiced in the workplace for career advancement, it should also be considered as a tool to effectively help students improve themselves in their learning of English language skills, as attested by several studies, including the results of the present study. Furthermore, future studies can also be conducted on various reflective methods to enhance learning.

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