

Empowering Reflective Learners: An Action Research Study on Reflection-for-, in-, and on-Action in Junior Secondary English as Second Language Classrooms

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Abstract

Reflective practice refers to learning through and from experience towards gaining new insights into self and practice. Zimmerman (2002) highlights the importance of self-regulated learning, where reflection enhances academic performance. This action research project was initiated by a teacher educator with the central aim of exploring the application and impact of reflective learning strategies among junior secondary English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. The sample consisted of two groups: three in-service teachers and 63 ESL learners in grade 9. The research was conducted over a four-month period as part of a teacher development program, in its 'Current Trends and Practices in Education' course. Various data collection methods were utilized, including teacher interviews, focus group discussions with students, classroom observations by the teacher educator, teacher reflective logs, student reflective journals and student portfolios. The findings, obtained through both quantitative and qualitative data indicated that irrespective of the fact that culture shock as the main challenge to be faced, reflective strategies such as goal setting (learning contracts), self-monitoring checklists, peer feedback cards, learner journals and whole class debriefs led to enhanced learner engagement, improved language awareness, and stronger self-directed learning habits. Thus, the study affirms the effectiveness of embedding reflective learning in ESL education.

Keywords: reflective strategies, English as a Second Language (ESL) junior secondary learners, action research

Introduction

Reflective practice has long been recognized as an important aspect of teacher education. Yet, it has not been adequately utilized in fostering reflective learners in the secondary school context, which can be considered a crucial element in learner-centered education. Zimmerman (2002) states that self-regulated learners are proactive in their efforts to learn because they are guided by personally set goals and task-related strategies and are aware of their strengths and limitations. Further, the importance of learner reflection in autonomy is emphasized by Nunan (1999), who states that "helping learners think about and reflect on their learning is central to the development of autonomy and effective language acquisition" (p. 61).

Reflective practice in the ESL context can be highly beneficial in fostering meaningful learning and growth, particularly when learners encounter challenges such as language barriers, cultural adjustment, and lack of confidence. Schön (1983) asserts that reflection is not a single act but rather a multifaceted process that can occur

before, during, and after practice. These three forms—reflection-for-action, reflection-in-action, and reflection-on-action—offer a theoretical foundation for developing pedagogical interventions that foster deeper learning. By using reflective techniques, students can better understand their own development and obstacles and modify their methods accordingly. "We do not learn from experience, we learn from reflecting on experience," (Dewey,1933). This is especially important for ESL students, who can benefit from actively evaluating which strategies are effective and which ones are not in their language learning process. According to Oxford (2011), "reflection allows learners to identify the strategies that lead to success and to discard those that do not serve them well" (p. 36).

Thus, the current study aimed to design and implement a range of reflective learning strategies, grounded in Schön's (1983) typology of reflection-for-action, reflection-in-action, and reflection-on-action which included goal setting (learning contracts), self-monitoring checklists, peer feedback cards, learner journals and whole-class debriefs as reflective strategies in the ESL classroom.

Research Objectives

The overall purpose of the study is to develop and evaluate the effectiveness of reflective practice strategies, framed by Schön's reflection-for-, reflection-in-, and reflection-on-action in promoting learner autonomy, metacognitive development, and engagement in junior secondary ESL classrooms.

Objectives

1. To design reflective learning strategies rooted in theory and appropriate for junior secondary ESL learners
2. To implement these strategies in the classroom setting
3. To evaluate the impact of reflective strategies on learner autonomy, metacognitive development, and engagement in junior secondary ESL classrooms

Research Methodology

The present study was action research conducted to develop and evaluate the effectiveness of reflective practice strategies framed by Schön's (1983) reflection-for-, reflection-in-, and reflection-on-action in promoting learner autonomy, metacognitive development, and engagement in junior secondary ESL classrooms.

Action Research

Action research involves using critical reflection and collaboration to bring about positive change (Arteaga, 2022). According to Koshy (2010), action research is a process for improving educational practice undertaken by individuals who share a common purpose. There are four basic stages in the cyclical action research process: reflect, plan, act, and observe, followed by reflection to continue the cycle (Dickens & Watkins, 1999), providing the researcher with the opportunity to continuously evaluate and improve practice through informed decision-making.

The Present Study

The present study was conducted with three in-service teachers following a teacher development program, undertaking an assignment in its 'Current Trends and Practices in Education' course. It was conducted over a period of four months. Multiple data collection instruments are illustrated below.

Table 1*Multiple data collection instruments*

Research Objective	Data Collection Tools	Data Sets
1. To design reflective learning strategies rooted in theory as appropriate for junior secondary ESL learners	-Teacher interviews - Focus group discussions with students	- Transcripts of teacher interviews on current reflective practices and needs - Transcripts of student perceptions and expectations regarding learning methods
2. To implement these strategies in classroom setting	-Classroom observations -Teacher reflective logs - Student reflective journals	- Observation notes during implementation of reflective strategies - Teachers' weekly reflection logs on classroom practices
3. To evaluate the impact of reflective strategies on learner autonomy, metacognitive development, and engagement in junior secondary ESL classrooms	-Student portfolios	- Journal entries reflecting learner thoughts post-task - Portfolios showcasing progressive learning tasks

The action research was conducted by using a systematic procedure.

In this assignment, the in-service teachers implemented the intervention plan designed by the teacher educator which incorporated reflective strategies for reflection-for-action, reflection-in-action, and reflection-on-action as illustrated below in the intervention plan. Further, the three in-service teachers kept their reflection logs while learners were encouraged to keep reflective journals and portfolios of their language activities.

Table 2*Intervention Plan*

Type of Reflection	Strategy	Activity Description	Tools Used
Reflection-for-Action	Goal setting (Learning Contracts)	Students complete a goal-setting template outlining what they want to improve (e.g., vocabulary, speaking fluency) and how they plan to do it.	Goal-setting template
Reflection-in-Action	Self-Monitoring Checklists	During group speaking or writing tasks, students use a checklist to monitor their use of specific target language structures or vocabulary.	Task-specific checklist
	Peer Feedback Cards	While watching or listening to a peer's presentation, students fill in a feedback card with prompts like "I noticed..." or "Next time, try..."	Peer feedback cards
Reflection-on-Action	Learner Journals	After completing a project or task, students write journal entries	Guided learner journal template
	Whole-Class Debriefs	Teacher facilitates a discussion after a major activity (e.g., presentation, group work), asking students to share strategies, challenges, and successes.	Discussion prompts

This intervention was conducted over a period of four months, and the researcher made random visits to observe the implementation and evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention.

As a pre-requisite, a series of workshops to train the learners in the use of reflective strategies for ESL learning and alongside regular briefing sessions for the teachers.

Data Analysis and Recommendations

The action research study on empowering reflective learners in Junior Secondary ESL classrooms generated a wealth of information, providing a comprehensive understanding of the reflective strategies and their impact on learner engagement, improved language awareness, and the development of stronger self-directed learning habits. The findings can be organized and presented as follows.

Reflective Learning Strategies Appropriate for Junior Secondary ESL Classrooms

The summary of the data sets collected through teacher interviews on current reflective practices and needs and focus group discussions with students on perceptions and expectations regarding learning methods can be presented as follows.

Teacher Perceptions on Current Reflective Practices and Needs

The data analysis of teacher interviews conducted prior to planning the intervention brought insights into the intervention plan and the most emerging themes can be outlined as below.

All the three in-service teachers were in complete agreement that reflective learning is crucial in ESL learning to overcome the barriers, yet, in spite of its own advantages, reflective practice is rarely implemented practiced in junior secondary context due to varied reasons such as lack of training, traditional mindset of both the teacher and the learner, exam-oriented ESL classrooms. They spoke about the visible gap between the theoretical underpinning and practical classroom application of reflective strategies.

Further, the need for practical guidance, professional training and educational reforms to bring about to promote reflective learning was emphasized by all the three in-service teachers. *“To deviate from traditional methods, it needs the awareness and support from all the stakeholders”*. Importantly, reflective learning strategies such as goal setting, self-monitoring, peer feedback, journaling, classroom debriefing were identified as the most rewarding and feasible in the junior secondary ESL classroom.

Student Perceptions and Expectations on ESL Learning Methods

The insights from focus group discussions with students can be summarized as follows.

Most of them were unfamiliar with reflective learning strategies. They were surprised at the possibility of new methods such as goal setting and self-monitoring. However, a few students shared the classroom debriefing sessions once participated and peer feedback activities particularly when learning English with a foreign teacher.

Almost all the students expressed interest in new learning methods and were curious to know more about the application of the same in their own learning.

They highlighted the need for practice and guidance needed in the use of new methods and it seemed to be the worry they all had in their mind about the new methods of learning ESL.

Further, in spite of the enthusiasm, a majority of them in their limited English expressed conveyed a lack of confidence in using the language. One student expressing his disappointment, asked *“Are you taking only the good one’s teacher?”* a remark that underscored their eagerness to engage with English learning in more interactive and student-centered ways compared to traditional teacher-centered methods.

Considering both data gathered through teacher interviews and student focused group discussions with students, teacher briefing sessions, training workshops for students and the intervention was planned and implemented.

Measurement of the Success of the Intervention

The results of the intervention which aimed to develop and evaluate the effectiveness of reflective practice strategies framed by Schön's reflection-for-, in-, and on-action—in promoting learner autonomy, metacognitive development, and engagement in junior secondary ESL classrooms can be presented as follows: the summary of qualitative data gathered through the analysis of the student reflective journals, teacher reflective logs and observations made by the teacher educator and the quantitative data gathered through the evaluation of the student portfolio.

The Analysis of Qualitative Data

Qualitative data collected to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention were primarily obtained from student reflective journals, teacher reflection logs and observations conducted by the researcher. The findings can be summarized under three sub-headings: Student Reflections, Teacher Reflections and Teacher Educator Observations.

Student Reflections

The emerging themes from student reflections which consisted of both positive and negative comments can be summarized as follows.

On a Positive Note:

A majority of the students repeatedly commented that setting goals prior to the activity made it easier to accomplish the target for it help them maintain focused attention. *'When I know the goal of the activity, I know what to do and I can focus on that. Now I understand the difference. That was why I was clueless about what I was supposed to do then'*. It can be inferred that the learner engagement was high due to self-monitoring and peer feedback during reflection-in and majority of them commented positively on this for these strategies were seen as a facilitation. *'Using the checklists given helps me to correct myself easily and quickly. I enjoy doing it'*. *'Checking my own work is a new experience in learning English and it makes learning easier. I feel I can learn English now'*. *'Feedback cards made us engage in more productive group work and that is the best part of our new learning method'*. *'Keeping journals though less preferred at the beginning is now my favorite part of the new method'* stated one student repeatedly and a majority of them expressed the same feelings about reflective journals. They believed that it improved their writing skills though they used mixed code in keeping records. Further, they commented that it helps them to develop their thinking and planning as well. According to them, they started thinking that learning is their responsibility and learning English is not as impossible as they once believed. *'Learning is my job. Teachers are there to help us. I know it now'*.

On the Flipside:

A considerable number of students initially stated that *'this is a tiring method as each and every activity involves a series of tasks'*. This clearly indicates the culture shock in adopting the new method in which the learner needs to use a series of reflective strategies for self-directed learning. Many of them commented on their low language proficiency and served as a barrier to using reflective learning strategies.

Teacher Reflections

The emerging themes from the teacher's reflections can be presented as follows.

On a Positive Note:

All three in-service teachers consistently commented on how the new method adopted indicated the improved learner autonomy, metacognitive development, and learner engagement. *'Most of the students who hardly spoke in*

the classroom, now take responsibility for their own learning and ask questions, set their own goals, review and revise their own language using checklists etc.'

'Setting goals made the learner stay focused and take the responsibility of accomplishment of the task on their shoulders. This idea was repeated in their reflections.

Keeping journals enables students to improve their writing skills. 'I am so surprised to see how my students, most of them becoming more thoughtful in their reflections. I can clearly see the transition from general comments to thoughtful reflections. Their language is also developing. Maybe they take conscious efforts.

On the Flip Side:

Time constraints were identified as the most significant challenge stated by all the three in-service teachers. 'It is good to practice learner-centered methods, yet practical concerns are there. I am becoming more conscious about covering the syllabus and preparing my students for the upcoming term test.

The need for scaffolding in reflection, especially during the initiation stage, was regarded as a challenge faced by them in the implementation of the intervention.

Observations Made by the Teacher Educator / Researcher

The teacher educator's observations of the classroom, which triangulated with the teacher and student reflections, validated the overall effectiveness of the reflective learning intervention. Key observations are as follows:

On a Positive Note:

There was clear evidence of enhanced student participation and engagement. 'Students were very active, especially during peer feedback sessions, they were referring back to goal-setting templates and using checklists as well, and it clearly indicates the enthusiasm taken by the learners in reflective learning'

There were instances of metacognitive development and a gradual increase in the display of metacognition was also recorded. 'Some students verbalized not only what they did but also why they did it and it is a clear sign of the development of metacognition.'

The majority of students showed improved reflective abilities applied to their learning. The quality of journal entries improved gradually in terms of language as well as in analytical thinking.

On the Flip Side:

Despite the progress, initial resistance was observed among some students, particularly those with lower language proficiency. Additionally, time constraints within the school schedule created challenges in maintaining consistency across all strategies.

All in all, the analysis of the qualitative data can be summarized stating that reflective learning has its own pros and cons and if implemented with proper planning, it could be very effective as a strategy in enhancing learner autonomy, metacognition and learner engagement.

The Analysis of Quantitative Data

Quantitative data used to measure the effectiveness of the intervention were collected through an analysis of the student portfolios, which included progressive language tasks, goal-setting templates, peer feedback records, checklists, and journal entries. Portfolios were assessed based on criteria aligned with targeted ESL and reflective learning competencies, namely Goal-Setting Ability, Self-Monitoring, Peer Interaction, Depth of Reflection, Language Development and Learner Engagement.

A rubric-based scoring system using a five-point scale (1–5) was used across all portfolios for each skill area and the following bar graph illustrates the average scores of the 63 learners.

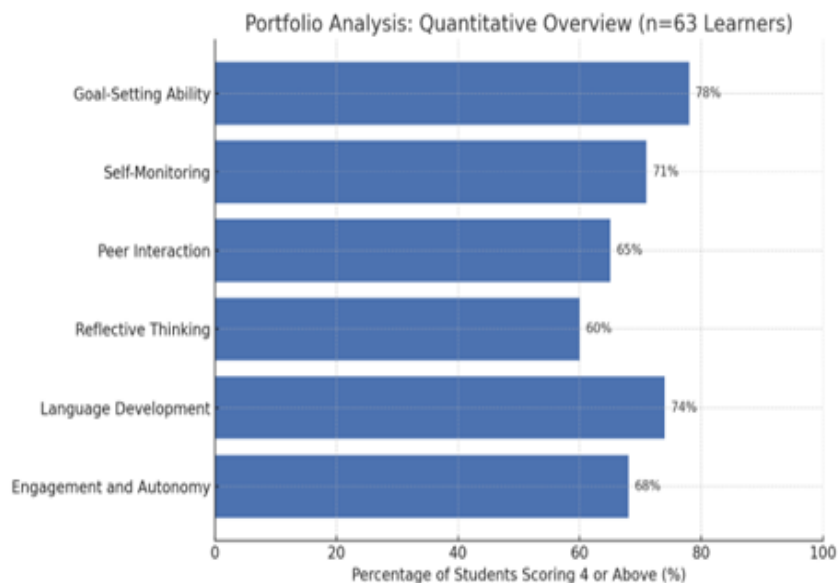


Figure 1

Portfolio Analysis: Quantitative Overview

As illustrated above, students' goal-setting abilities and metacognitive awareness demonstrated significant growth. Speaking fluency and vocabulary development were aided by reflective techniques. Over time, portfolios showed an increase in learner ownership of the learning process. Nonetheless, many students still struggle with reflective journal writing and require teacher guidance. Due to irregular participation or low confidence, 15% of students demonstrated limited progress.

Recommendations

Based on the intervention and its measurement of effectiveness the following recommendations could be proposed. Reflective learning strategies can be effectively implemented in the junior secondary ESL classrooms, if proper planning and student training are provided. Culture shock experienced by teachers could be overcome through proper planning, and training provided to the learner on the use of reflective strategies would be useful in overcoming the culture shock experienced by the learner. Scaffolding in reflective learning through strategies such as teacher modeling, templates, checklists and language prompts is crucial in the initial stages of reflective learning.

Embedding reflective strategies into the existing ESL curriculum should be supported through syllabus adjustments and flexible scheduling. To address the time constraint, reflective learning should be integrated into the curriculum, without making it out of syllabus context.

Ongoing professional development for ESL teachers on reflective pedagogy is essential to ensure consistency and effectiveness. Teachers require continuous exposure to the principles and practices of reflection-for-, in-, and on-action, along with support in designing classroom activities that foster autonomy and metacognition.

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