

## 研究ノート

# Change Through Reflection: A Qualitative Analysis of Student Reflections on the Classroom Experience

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### 要 旨

前稿では、半期選択科目である TOEIC クラスにおいて、自律学習を促すため実施されたリフレクション活動を紹介した（櫻井 2015）。学期の最後に行われたアンケートによると、程度に差は見られたものの、ほとんどの学生がリフレクション活動を通して何らかの肯定的な変化を感じていた。また、どのような変化が起こったかという質問に対しては、新しい気づきを得た、語学学習に対して肯定的な態度が育った、自身の学習過程を客観的に観察する方法を学んだ、モチベーションが向上したなどが多岐にわたり挙げられていた。本稿では、わずかに修正されたリフレクション活動を半期必須科目である TOEIC クラスで実施し、活動を通して学生がどの程度の変化を感じ、どのような学習効果を認識していたのかを質的に分析し報告する。本研究は、大学の語学授業における自律学習の促進をテーマに更なる研究を進めるための探索的研究である。

### Abstract

This study builds on the research began in a previous article, which introduced a reflection activity that was designed and implemented by the author to promote learner autonomy in semester-long elective university TOEIC preparation classes (Sakurai, 2015). Although the degree of change varied, student surveys on the activity showed that most students perceived a wide range of positive changes, such as gaining new awareness, developing an improved attitude toward language learning, increased motivation, and the ability to self-monitor their own learning. In this project, students in a compulsory TOEIC preparation course participated in a slightly modified version of the activity. This exploratory study aimed to examine how well students responded to the reflection activity and to investigate the learning effects perceived by students. This study is designed to be a basis for further studies that investigate the effectiveness of the activity with regard to promoting learner autonomy at university language classes.

Key words: reflections (リフレクション), autonomous learners (自律学習者), learner autonomy (学習者オートノミー), TOEIC preparation class (TOEIC 対策クラス), exploratory study (探索的研究)

## **Introduction**

Nowadays many Japanese universities offer TOEIC preparation courses to help students improve their scores. Although having a good TOEIC score may give students an advantage when they search for a job, a TOEIC class runs the risk of being teacher-centered, heavily focused on daunting repeated exercises and transmission of information. To address this issue, a reflection activity was designed to promote more active learner involvement in a test preparation class. This is an exploratory study, and it qualitatively analyzes what students believed they learned from the activity and inductively explores different learning effects perceived by students. The article first introduces the reflection activity. Results of the study are shared next, followed by a brief discussion of the potential of the activity and possible future research topics.

## **Reflection Activity**

The reflection activity consists of two major components. The first is reflection journal entries that students made during the last 5 to 15 minutes of each class throughout the semester. Questions for reflection were created with reference to Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1983), and students were told to write each entry by answering the questions, which can be found in Appendix A. This phase of the activity is designed to allow students to objectively observe and describe their learning experience in each class. It also attempts to encourage them to analyze their experience based on that description, to make a specific learning plan or goal based on the analysis, and to self-monitor the progress of their learning and/or fulfillment of their plan or goal. The other component is a final reflection assignment where students were required to revisit all the past journal entries and answer open-ended questions reflecting on their learning experience during the entire semester (Appendix B). The version used for this project had a few minor changes in the phrasing of the reflection questions. As discussed in Sakurai (2015), these changes were meant to encourage more in-depth reflection by students through adjustment of the amount of scaffolding built into the question.

All the reflection questions were given in Japanese, and the students answered them in Japanese. The English translations in the appendices are provided only for the purpose of this article. The students were reminded on a regular basis that their work on the journal

entries would be graded for how thoughtfully and meticulously they reflected and never for how much they improved their skills or test scores. Final reflection assignments were collected together with all the journal entries on the very last day of the course.

## Participants

Participants in this project included 27 male and 10 female Japanese university students in a compulsory TOEIC preparation class. They were in the law department; 33 were second year students, and there were four repeaters in their third year. The students' scores on the TOEIC IP test as of the end of the semester ranged from 205 to 570, with an average of 392.

## Data Collection and Analysis

The data for analysis was collected from students' final reflection assignments and a survey on their semester-long reflection experience (Appendices B & C). The first question of the survey asked if students perceived any change by doing reflections, and their answers were tallied and organized in comparison with the results of the previous project (Table 1). Most of the data for qualitative analysis was from students' responses to the open-ended question in the survey. Some information from the final reflection assignments was also considered as data for analysis when a student mentioned a reflection-related comment that did not overlap with what was written in the survey. The data was first open-coded phrase by phrase in relation to changes and learnings that could have been enhanced through the reflection experience. The codes were then grouped into larger categories. Finally, possible key concepts, patterns or relationships between those categories were inductively explored.

Table 1. Degree of Change Perceived by Students through Reflection

Year	Strongly agree	Agree very much	Agree	I don't know	Don't agree that much	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total (n=)
2014 (n=47)	11	20	12	3	0	0	1	47
2015 (n=36)	7	19	10	0	0	0	0	36

## Results

According to Table 1, there is no significant difference between the results of the 2014 and 2015 cohorts, indicating that both groups recognized positive changes in the self as a result of the reflection activity. During the process of coding and sorting the data, there emerged six categories that described aspects of learning promoted through the activity: awareness of the self as a language learner, strategies for more efficient learning, the development of reflection skills, improved engagement in class, increase in intrinsic motivation, and positive attitudes toward using the reflection journal and studying outside the class. These aspects are not considered as separate entities; rather they appear to influence each other, reinforcing and enhancing each other through the course of the reflection process.

### *(1) Awareness of Themselves as Language Learners*

Among the aspects of learning, the most commonly mentioned aspect was the students' development of self-awareness as language learners. Keeping track of the process and progress of their own learning and having the record at hand seemed to help students develop a deeper understanding of who and where they were as English learners. This includes the awareness of several features, such as one's own weaknesses and strengths, improvement in language skills, habits when choosing the answer options, learning tendencies, and areas for improvement. One student commented, "Looking back on my past English study habits, I often felt I didn't even know what I didn't understand. Although I knew I didn't understand (why I got answers incorrect), I didn't have the habit of reviewing mistakes. However, I have gained a clearer understanding of what I don't know and what I am not good at through writing reflections ...". Other statements included, "I've got to be able to understand clearly what I couldn't do, what I could do, and what I couldn't do first but I can now. With the new awareness (I gained), I tried to tackle (TOEIC) exercises," "(Reflection) gave me a wonderful opportunity to actively explore and discover my English learning tendencies," and "I have changed my approach to studying for TOEIC. That was the biggest change for me."

### *(2) Strategies for More Efficient Learning*

Many of the students also seem to have gained the awareness that a reflection journal is an effective study tool and began using it as such. Some students felt that reflection helped

them retain or remember the information given in class more efficiently. One student mentioned, “Writing in my own words helped make lessons more memorable,” while another said, “Writing a reflection entry at the end of each class allowed me to retain information. This is because I can remember better when I actually write by myself.” Reflection also contributed to improving students’ academic efficiency in respect to a deeper understanding of the subject matter, improved readiness for subsequent classes, and establishment of personal learning goals. One student commented, “(By writing reflections) I was able to understand test-taking skills for each part of the TOEIC test more in detail.” Others indicated, “By writing a reflection at the end of each class, I was able to organize and digest what I learned in class, so I felt better prepared for the next class,” and “(Through reflection) I can analyze what is taught each class in detail, and this makes areas for improvement clearly seen, and then I can effectively take the next measures. That is, in terms of increase in study efficiency, reflection has greatly changed my way of learning.” Finally, one student felt that using reflection when studying helped achieve the course objective, stating, “I have improved my scores on online TOEIC practice tests.”

### *(3) The Development of Reflection Skills*

The next aspect of learning relates to developing reflection skills and the habit of reflection. Students’ comments include, “I have learned to think about ‘why’ both when I get answers right and when I don’t get answers right,” “I got to reflect objectively, and I looked back on my reflection entries many times throughout the semester,” and “ I think I have developed the habit of observing and reflecting.” A few students seemed to achieve a deeper level of awareness. For instance, one student realized the significance of reflection through his own experience, and mentioned, “The big change for me would be getting into the habit of reflecting on each class on the same day. (...) I think, though, it defeats the purpose of reflection if you don’t take it seriously and commit to it. By looking back (on the whole semester through the final reflection assignment), I felt so glad that I made an effort and kept a record every class.” Furthermore, a few students considered adopting the acquired reflection skills in their future English learning or other university courses. One example is: “It wouldn’t have occurred to me that I would do something like this (keeping a reflection journal in each class). I think I have developed a good habit. I feel this could be used in other classes, too.”

*(4) Improved Engagement in Class*

Reflection also appears to have promoted some positive changes in terms of students' engagement in class. Some students suggested that they were more focused in class, stating "I think I stayed focused and worked on assigned tasks more than ever during class because I had to remember what I learned in class so that I could write a reflection," and "Writing reflections enabled me to process and organize information given in each class. This allowed me to understand the skills necessary to improve my English and face the challenges I should deal with. Thus, I focused better in every class." In addition, some students worked on in-class assignments and tasks with clear purposes and goals that they established on their own. Two students commented: "I ran over my reflection entries after class to review what I should have been careful about or what I should keep in mind (when I work on TOEIC exercises). I made good use of them in the next class," and "The biggest change for me is 'awareness.' (...) When I was in class, I was aware of things that had become clear through reflections."

*(5) Increase in Intrinsic Motivation*

Another change observed was an increase in intrinsic motivation, which seemed to have happened on different levels depending on the student. The following shows why and how reflections improved intrinsic motivation: "I think being able to see what I'm good at and what I've learned to do would lead to an increase in motivation," "I have come to review mistakes more carefully. (...) Analyzing why I couldn't do something, I can see what I need to do to be able to do it. I've developed the will to work of my own volition, rather than having someone else tell me what to do. This was a big change for me," and "While reviewing my reflections, my mistakes and the things I had been unable to do became a source of motivation for me. When I was able to write about getting more questions right and improving myself, I think that it made me want to work even harder. Because I was able to see my growth over time, I believe these reflections had a big effect on my motivation to study for the TOEIC test." By setting up small goals based on the reflection journal, another student felt, "I've learned to motivate myself and keep my motivation level high."

Furthermore, an increase in intrinsic motivation resulted in changes in behavior such as an increase in study time outside the class. Two examples would be: "Writing reflections has fostered my willingness to overcome weaknesses, and I feel I have come to spend more time

studying at home. I had hardly ever studied outside the class except for the quizzes or the final exam, but I now try to study for at least one hour a week,” and “My reflection entries suggested I should work particularly to improve vocabulary, so I independently studied vocabulary, spending more time studying English outside the class.” Finally, for this particular aspect, a distinct connection between awareness of either weaknesses or improvement and positive motivational transformation was observed; all of the students who believed that reflection improved their motivation indicated one or both factors as the cause of their increased motivation.

*(6) Positive Attitudes Toward Using the Reflection Journal and Studying Outside the Class*

Students appear to have voluntarily utilized their reflection journal outside the class in their own ways to meet their learning needs. In some cases, it served as a reminder to briefly review weaknesses or areas for improvement before class, studying at home, and/or doing the online TOEIC practice tests assigned as homework. One student mentioned, “I gained the habit of checking how I did in the last class (before the following class or before I started studying at home).” Another stated, “The reflection journal helped me prioritize what I should work on. I used it more often when I studied for TOEIC at home.” One student felt that the convenience of being able to review her written reflections increased her will to study: “Because I could see what needed to be studied at a glance, (the reflection journal) increased not only the efficiency of my learning, but it actually increased my studying time.” According to another student, the reflection journal was a way to monitor and analyze his progress. He commented, “When I studied for TOEIC on my own, I compared how I did in class and how I did at home. This allowed me to recognize areas where I put enough effort and did well, and areas where I didn’t work hard.”

Finally, one student reflected on the entire experience and commented, “I started to feel that I should take advantage of the opportunity to review the things I couldn’t do this week before next week’s class, so I wanted to study, even just a little bit. When I realized that I was gradually becoming faster at answering TOEIC questions, my interest in the TOEIC test increased, so I think it had an increasingly positive effect, creating a virtuous cycle of learning.” For this student, it appears that all the aspects of learning were promoted, integrated, and influenced by each other, creating a continuous positive learning cycle.

## Discussion

The results of the 2014 and 2015 studies suggest that most of the students perceived positive change through the reflection activity regardless of the majors of the students, the type of class (compulsory or elective), or their year in school. In many cases, students in an elective TOEIC class choose to take the class of their own will, for their own good, and have more commitment to their language learning. On the other hand, some students in a compulsory English class may have less interest in English and/or be reluctant to be in the class. As far as the students in the previous and current project are concerned, however, these factors did not seem to have any particular influence on the degree of perceived change.

Regarding learning outcomes, the reflection activity appears to have enhanced various aspects of learning, including an increased knowledge of the subject matter, the development of awareness of the learning process that improved motivation, and the acquisition of skills that could help students in their future studies. However, the type and amount of learning that occurred seemed to vary between individuals. It is possible that learning occurred more independently for students who were actively engaged in the reflection process, whereas it occurred more passively for students who were dependent on the teacher's instructions and/or scaffolding. Furthermore, a few students started taking initiative and managing their learning, which is a fundamental quality of an autonomous learner.

Practically speaking, the significance of the study stems from the potential of the reflection activity to be used as a tool to incorporate learner autonomy into a university class. The activity does not require a lot of class time, and more importantly, it can address many skills and traits that autonomous learners need to develop. Murphey (2003) states that autonomy is not the same for each person, commenting, "People need to be trusted to generate and manage the kinds of autonomy that best fit their needs at particular points in time" (p.7). As the findings of the current study demonstrate, the reflection activity could provide a freedom and flexibility that allows students to take control over what to learn, how to learn, and how much effort and time to put into learning, according to their needs. Finally, Scharle and Szabó (2000) outline the importance of shifting the teacher's role from the traditional one to that of a facilitator in order to help students take more responsibility in their learning as they progress in autonomy. From the teacher's perspective, this activity could give the teacher the room to shift roles depending on each individual student's needs.

## Closing

It is important to note that the goal of this study is not to draw any final conclusions, as it is intended to be an exploratory study. Based on the results, more in-depth research, including individual interviews with students, will be conducted. The research will further examine aspects of learning enhanced by the reflection activity as well as their connections and interrelations. Another issue of interest that emerged during this study was the possibility of factors that could influence the quality of a student's reflections. It appears some students took more initiative to reflect on their own learning and did more quality reflection, while others rather passively answered the given reflection question(s) without developing much insight into their learning experience. Exploring how students approach reflections and the factors that lead to differences in reflection quality would contribute to a deeper understanding of learner autonomy.

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## Appendix A

### *Questions for Reflection Journal Entries*

Part 1. What have you learned in today's class? What techniques did you practice? What have you realized about study skills, TOEIC test-taking strategies, and/or strengths and weaknesses as an English learner?

Part 2. How would you like to make use of what you have written in Part 1? What do you need to study by the next class? What is your next goal? Have you noticed anything while reading back your past journal entries?

Part 1. 今日の授業で学んだ事、今日練習したテクニックはどんなものですか？ TOEIC 受検テクニック、勉強方法、自分の弱点や強みなど自分自身の英語学習において気が付いた事は何かですか？

Part 2. Part 1で記入した事を今後どのように活用していきたいですか？次回の授業までに何を勉強するとよいと思いますか？今後の課題はどんな事だと思いますか？以前に書いた事を読み返して何か気づいた事はありますか？

## Appendix B

### *Open-Ended Questions in the Final Reflection Assignment*

Part 1. Please read all your journal entries. 1) What kind of things did you notice while looking back at the whole semester? 2) What attitude toward learning do you think you have developed? What skills or knowledge do you think you have gained? 3) Is there any area in which you feel you have improved? Please write anything you have noticed, and support your answers with reasons.

Part 2. Please look back over all your reflection entries. How do you feel your TOEIC and/or English study will change in the future? What do you plan to concentrate on from now on? Please explain in detail.

Part 1. 全てのリフレクションのエントリーに目を通してください。 1) この講義を通して、どんな事に気づきましたか？ 2) どのような学習態度が身についたと感じますか？ どんなスキルや知識が得られたと思いますか？ 3) 上達したと感じた事はありますか？ どんな事でもいいので、しっかりと理由を書いて説明してください。

Part 2. 全てのリフレクションのエントリーに目を通してください。TOEIC や英語学習において、今後の課題は何だと感じますか？ 今後はどのような事に取り組んで行きたいですか？ 具体的に書いてください。

## Appendix C

### *Students' Survey on Their Reflection Experience*

Throughout the semester you reflected on each class and wrote reflections.

- a) Have you noticed any change through the entire process of reflection? Please circle the most appropriate option.

I totally agree   I agree very much   I agree   I don't know   I don't agree very much  
I disagree   I strongly disagree

- b) If you feel that change(s) occurred, please explain the change(s) with specific reasons.  
If you feel that no change has occurred, please explain why, stating specific reasons.

本講義では、毎回の授業最後にリフレクションを行ってきました。

- a) この授業でリフレクションをすることにより、何か変化はあったと思いますか？答えを○で囲んでください。

非常にそう思う。   結構そう思う。   そう思う。   分からない。   あまりそう思わない。  
そう思わない。   全くそう思わない。

- b) 変化が起こったと感じた場合はどんな変化か、起こっていないと感じた場合はその理由を、具体的に書いてください

