

Critical Reflection Through Journal Writing: A Case Study

Takeshi Kajigaya

ABSTRACT

Reflection and critical enquiry are fundamentally important in teacher development (Richards, 1998), and journal writing has been considered as a useful tool for teacher development for a long time (Farrell, 1998). However, there are only a few studies that have investigated how efficiently journal writing promotes critical reflection. Moreover, there is no research that has explored the reason why teachers do or do not reflect through journal writing. In the present paper, the author first analyzes how critically he reflected on his teaching through journal writing, then investigates what promoted his critical reflection. Unlike past research's suggestions, the findings of the current paper indicate that not only the teacher's experience or personality, but also external factors such as the ease of classroom management, classroom atmosphere, or teaching schedules can influence why teachers reflect (or do not reflect) critically.

INTRODUCTION

Reflection has dominated the teacher education sphere for a long time, and thus has been incorporated in many teacher-education programs (Farrell, 2008). However, it is known that the degree to which teachers actually "reflect" is greatly different depending on the guidance or supervision available to them (Gün, 2010). In addition, relationships between the quality of reflection and the means of reflection (e.g., using videos, written-journals, or discussions etc.) have been unclear. The present study investigates the quality of reflection through journal writing.

Reflection and critical reflection

In this paper, I define the term "critical reflection" as "an activity or process in which experience is recalled, considered, and evaluated, usually in relation to a broader purpose" (Richards, 1998, p. 21) and consider that it is different from — and that it includes — non-critical reflection, which simply looks back at the teaching and describes it (Gün, 2010). As the definition suggests, critical reflection is a process in which teachers collect data about their teaching and interpret them. It has a great value when teachers make educational decisions based on their interpretation (Gün, 2010). Furthermore, this process can help teachers "move from a level where they may be guided largely by impulse, intuition or routine, to a level where their actions are guided by reflection and critical thinking" (Farrell, 2013, p. 465), and they can "begin to exercise control and open up the possibility of transforming [their] every classroom life" (Bartlett, 1990, p. 205). Critical reflection is different from non-critical reflection in that it goes beyond simple descriptions of every-day teaching, and asks critical questions such as "why" teachers are teaching their way, "what" meaning their teaching has, or "how" they can teach differently (Bartlett, 1990; Farrell, 2001; Gün, 2010; Ho & Richards, 1993).

Obviously, teachers often non-critically reflect on their teaching to make educational decisions, and such reflections do have benefits both for learners and teachers. Critical reflection further adds value to non-critical reflection by inquiring "the origin and consequences of everyday teaching so that we come to see the factors that impeded change and thus improvement" (Bartlett, 1990, p. 206).

Journal writing

For a long time, journal writing has been seen as an "excellent tool for reflection" (Farrell, 1998), as it can be an opportunity for teachers to explore their own teaching practices and beliefs (Ho &

Richards, 1993) through documentation of their teaching and analysis of them for deeper understanding of their work (Burton, 2005; Farrell, 2007). Journal writing is easy to conduct, yet it can be a powerful means not only for reflection, but also problem-solving or classroom research (Brock, Yu, & Wong, 1992).

At the same time, empirical studies show mixed results on the relationship between journal writing and critical reflection. In a classic study, Ho & Richards (1993) studied ten in-service teachers at a tertiary institution in Hong Kong and found only three teachers reflected critically, four reflected critically to some extent, and three reflected in a non-critical mode. Elsewhere, Farrell (1998) studied three experienced EFL teachers in Korea and found only one reflected critically. In Farrell's (2001) longitudinal study on one Korean EFL teacher (one of the participants in his study above), the participant not only showed little indication of critical reflection but also commented she did not want to ask critical questions to herself, resulting in termination of journal writing in the middle of the research period. Overall, past research results support that even though writing itself has a "built-in mechanism" (Farrell, 2013, p. 470) for teachers to reflect, journals tend to end up in mere descriptions of "what happened today" and teachers do not ask critical reflective questions to seek the underlying theories or beliefs without proper training or guidance (Farrell, 2001; Gün, 2010; Ho & Richards, 1993).

However, the number of empirical studies investigating this matter is surprisingly low and more data is needed to reveal the relationship between the quality of reflection and journal writing. Moreover, the account of 'why' or 'why not' teachers reflected critically seems to be missing in past research, which may be because the studies mentioned above were conducted by a researcher as an outsider. The danger of journal studies lies in the very fact that the researchers read and interpret the participants' journals. As Hatton & Smith (1995) caution, journal entries can sometimes be "altered to accommodate to the perceived expectations of the reader, rather than to suit the writer's own end" (p. 43). It is therefore difficult for researchers to distinguish, for example, why a certain entry was written or *not* written (i.e., it is difficult to know if the participant simply forgot to write something, or if he/she intentionally did not write that, or if he/she did not even realize it was unwritten). In this case study, I take advantage of self-analysis and supplement the data from my journal with my own feelings to answer why I reflected critically or non-critically.

The aim of this case study is twofold: to provide additional findings on the quality of reflection through journal writing, and to answer why/why not I reflected critically using a journal. Referring to Ho & Richards (1993), and Farrell (2001), this paper is structured as the answers to the following questions: 1) To what extent did I reflect critically? and 2) Why did I / did I not reflect critically?

DISCUSSION

Setting

I have 10 years of teaching experience inside and outside Japan, and have been teaching English discussion skills at a university in Japan for one year, where the data for this study was collected. The data was collected in the fall semester of the 2017 academic year, when I taught 13 to 14 classes per week. The classes were offered from Monday to Saturday (two to three classes per day), and students were divided into three proficiency levels based on their placement test results.

Data

I kept a journal for almost every class (one entry per day), except some lessons such as introduction lessons, test lessons, lessons with low attendance and so forth. In total, I kept 42 entries, and each entry was structured with the minimum guidelines shown in Figure 1 to look at the general tendency of my reflection.

	Students	Me
Good		
Bad		

Figure 1. Structure of the journal entries.

Result

To what extent did I reflect critically?

The first research question was to see how critical I reflected on my teaching. In order to answer this question, I used the modified version of Ho & Richards' (1993) categories and analyzed how many critical reflections I had in the journal (Table 1). To gain a better understanding of the data, I have also compared my data to the average numbers of critical reflections in Farrell's (1998) study.

Although Farrell's (1998) study does not have the data for "Evaluation", my data shows that I reflected critically on *theories of teaching*, *self-awareness*, and *questions about teaching* more frequently than the averages in his study. For example, I critically analyzed why my class did not go well, and what I should have done in the series of entries about the 2nd period class on Monday. In Week 4, I expressed my frustration:

"[X] and [Y] started to use Japanese... I should have looked into eyes straight and treated the incident more seriously, strictly, but warmly, because I was stressed/overwhelmed by their behavior [and tried to avoid the situation]. I couldn't mention the issues with smiles. Students should've felt offended."

In Week 6, I started to conceive a personal theory: "I could control [X] and [Y]. If I look at the students seriously, they will listen. Don't ignore your students."

I felt this theory was "proven" by improved classroom atmosphere in a later entry in Week 7: "Every student seemed to focus more than before. They looked at me and did not rely on Japanese much... Again, don't ignore your students."

In these entries, it is clear that I critically analyzed the problematic situation, contrived a personal theory for resolution (i.e., "look at the students"), and analyzed how the theory influenced the classroom (i.e., "every student seemed to focus more"). Therefore, the data analysis showed that I could reflect critically even without training or supervision. The crucial question of the present study is, however, *why* I could do so. In the next section, I will closely look at which factors seemed to promote critical reflection, and conversely, in which occasions I did not reflect critically.

Table 1. Summary of the frequency of critical reflection

Category (from Ho & Richards, 1993)	Total (times)	Average number in Farrell's (1998) study
Theories of teaching	21*	8.6
Approaches & method	5	7.3
Evaluation	11	N/A
Self-awareness	7*	5.0
Questions about teaching	1*	0.3

Note. Asterisks indicate number of reflections greater than average in Farrell's study.

Why did I (or did I not) reflect critically?

In order to answer this question, I have analyzed on which day I had critical analyses (Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of the frequency of critical reflection on each day.

Category	Day and frequency (times)						Average per day (times)
	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	
Theories of teaching	12	0	2	2	4	1	
Approaches & method	1	0	1	1	2	0	
Evaluating teaching	4	2	0	0	1	4	
Self-awareness	0	1	1	1	1	3	
Questions about teaching	1	0	0	0	0	0	
Total	18*	3	4	4	8*	8*	7.5

Note. Asterisks indicate number of reflections greater than average.

The data shows that there were only three days (Mondays, Fridays, and Saturdays) that I had critical reflection than the average (7.5 times per day). Although several reasons could have contributed to this result, there seem to be three main reasons.

Ease of classroom management

The first possible reason is how smoothly I could manage the class, or the ease of classroom management. For example, I remember that I planned a lot for Monday students, because some students did not focus on the class and/or their language proficiency was lower than other classes. They also used Japanese in and between activities, even though a strong English-only policy is emphasized in all the classes. Students' behavior shocked and cause me stress at first, but then I decided to analyze what was really happening, why it was happening, and how I could possibly resolve the problem. From my experience, I knew that students do not listen to me if I do not listen to what they said and try to avoid the problematic situations by focusing on 'well-behaved' students. Thus, I decided to praise every student more, and include students' utterances in the feedback more than before instead of focusing only on some students. After this educational

decision, I realized that students started to look at me, ask questions to me in English, and focus more on activities. Therefore, in this case, although students' 'problematic' behaviors shocked me at first, they later prompted me to reflect critically to improve the situation.

In another class on Friday, I had one student whose listening ability seemed to be lower than the others, and two students who did not focus in the beginning of the semester. In the first two or three entries, I clearly showed frustration when students did not understand my instructions, they gave up expressing their opinions very frequently, or they did not do homework. However, after I encountered these issues, I again started to analyze the situation in later entries. Since I was experiencing the same kinds of problems on Mondays and Fridays, I decided to apply the same resolution. That is, I decided to praise students more or reflect students' voices in feedback instead of ignoring the problems. As this shift happened, I felt students started to focus more, realized students do homework more, and heard that they enjoyed my class. In later entries, I showed my satisfaction about students' behavior and was convinced that my working theory (i.e., students will focus if the teacher involves everyone) seemed right. Here, just like the Monday class, students' behavior first shocked me, but then that motivated me to analyze the situation at a deeper level. I applied the possible resolution in class and felt a positive influence of the decision.

On the contrary to Monday and Friday entries, Tuesday entries generally remained simple and there were only three critical descriptions. This is presumably because Tuesday students were in the highest proficiency level, who generally focused on the task throughout the semester. As they always looked at me, worked on the feedback, and did homework, Tuesday entries are focusing on positive aspects of the students and my teaching overall.

What can be inferred from the examples above is that critical reflection happened to me most as a problem-solving strategy. When unavoidable managerial problems occurred in class, that naturally led me to analyze problems, plan solutions and apply them, and examine the results, which is the very cycle of critical reflection suggested by Bartlett (1990). Contrarily, critical reflection rarely happened when I felt the class had only a few problems. This, however, is not the only factor that promoted critical reflection. Even though both Tuesday and Saturday classes are in the highest proficiency level, I had only four critical reflection incidents in the former class, whereas I had eight in the latter. This can be explained in terms of classroom atmosphere in two classes.

Classroom atmosphere

In the fall semester, both groups on Saturdays and Tuesdays were in the highest proficiency level, yet my classroom experience was totally different between the two. Saturday students were generally more reactive and active than Tuesday students, who were quieter and preferred to focus on the tasks without my help. As a result, even though both groups of students had a similar language proficiency, Saturday students asked more questions, showed confused faces when they did not understand the instructions, or answered my questions, whereas Tuesday students preferred to finish the tasks quickly rather than requesting additional information or asking for different expressions. Consequently, I did more improvisations in Saturday classes (e.g., providing extra information or doing small chats with students), and encountered more instructional issues *because of* improvisations or because students explicitly told me they did not understand. I often wrote I ran out of time or unnecessarily complicated the situation by giving too much explanation/information to Saturday students. Conversely, I felt I could conduct 'smoother' classes on Tuesdays because students were generally quiet and did not ask many questions. In other words, Saturday classes' atmosphere led to more improvisations, which promoted critical reflection in two ways: In one way, improvisations promoted critical reflection because I could feel "personal growth" (coded as *self-awareness*) as a teacher by going beyond the pre-planned lesson. In another

way, they caused more problems, which made me analyze the situation as a problem-solving strategy.

Teacher's readiness for critical reflections

Yet another possible reason was my own readiness. In my current teaching context, teachers teach the same lesson throughout a week, in other words, we teach the same content to different groups of students 12 to 14 times per week. In the fall semester, Monday classes were usually the last or the second last groups in each lesson. As a result, being used to the flow and structure of the lesson allowed me to reflect at a deeper level. On the contrary, I tended to have non-critical reflections on Wednesdays or Thursdays as I was still focusing on procedural questions in the beginning of each lesson week.

The three assumptions above imply a complicated relationship between critical reflection and journal writing. I had critical reflection incidents most on Monday probably because I experienced managerial issues most on this day, and I was ready to reflect at a deeper level in the end of the lesson week as I had few procedural concerns. Conversely, I had only a few critical reflections on Tuesdays or Wednesdays because students were in higher level classes, and/or I experienced a small number of managerial issues, and/or I was still figuring out *how to* teach, rather than *why to* teach. However, even in the same-level classes, I had much more critical reflections in Saturday classes than Tuesday ones, mostly because Saturday students requested more information from me, resulting in more improvisations and thus critical reflection. It is, of course, impossible to draw a general conclusion from these findings, but at least they call for more attention on the factors that promote or hinder teachers' critical reflection.

CONCLUSION

In this case study, I referred to the past studies on the relationship between critical reflection and journal writing to investigate two questions: *To what extent did I reflect critically?* and *why did I reflect (or did I not reflect) critically?* The finding for the first research question showed that I had more critical reflections than the average numbers in Farrell's (1998) study. I analyzed the reasons for that in the second research question and found that there may be three main reasons: ease of classroom management, classroom atmosphere, and teacher's readiness for reflection. The data analysis revealed a complicated relationship between critical reflection and journal writing, as I could reflect critically without much guidance or supervision, though it mostly happened as a problem-solving strategy or reaction to the students. It seems that not only teachers' personalities or teaching experience, but also external factors such as students' language proficiency, classroom atmosphere, and teachers' schedules can influence why teachers reflect (or do not reflect) critically.

For teachers, it is undoubtedly difficult to make critical reflections on a daily basis, but since reflection and critical enquiry are the key components of teacher development (Richards, 1998), both teachers and teacher educators should keep investigating how to promote critical reflections. More studies are needed on different means of reflections and the factors that promote or hinder critical reflections.

REFERENCES

- Bartlett, L. (1990). Teacher development through reflective teaching. In J. C. Richards & D. Nunan (Eds.), *Second language teacher education* (pp. 202–214). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Brock, M., Yu, B., & Wong, M. (1992). "Journalling" together: Collaborative diary-keeping and teacher development. In J. Flowerdew, M. Brock, & S. Hsia (Eds.), *Perspectives on second language teacher development* (pp. 295–307). Hong Kong: City University of

Hong Kong.

- Burton, J. (2005). The importance of teachers writing on TESOL. *Tesl-Ej*, 9(2), 1–18. Retrieved from <http://www.tesl-ej.org/ej34/a2.html>
- Farrell, T. S. C. (2001). Tailoring reflection to individual needs: A TESOL case study. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 27(1), 23–38.
- Farrell, T. S. C. (2007). *Reflective language teaching: From research to practice*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Farrell, T. S. C. (2008). Critical incidents in ELT initial teacher training. *ELT Journal*, 62(1), 3–10.
- Farrell, T. S. C. (2013). Teacher self-awareness through journal writing. *Reflective Practice*, 14(4), 465–471.
- Gün, B. (2010). Quality self-reflection through reflection training. *ELT Journal*, 65(2), 126–135.
- Hatton, N., & Smith, D. (1995). Reflection in teacher education: Towards definition and implementation. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 11(1), 33–49.
- Ho, B., & Richards, J. C. (1993). Reflective Thinking Through Teacher Journal Writing: Myths and Realities. *Perspectives*, 5(2), 25–40.
- Richards, J. C. (1998). *Beyond training*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.