

# The Use of Reflective Journals in Professional Development

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## Abstract

Professional development is understood as a means to maintain and enhance the quality of teachers in any discipline. Not only can the learned information improve the teaching process, but it also contributes to career advancement. A reflective journal is part of this extraordinarily simple practice. They have been utilized in different fields of study such as literature, health care, and mathematics. Focusing on the contribution of reflective practice to teaching, this article is an attempt to understand the use of reflective journals in the personal growth and professional development of teachers of English as a foreign language, drawn from a wider perspective of the vast research done in the field of reflective journaling and to increase the effectiveness of reflective journaling.

**Keywords:** professional development, career advancement, reflective journal, personal growth, foreign language.

## INTRODUCTION

Every individual has an innate desire to become a better version of himself or herself, professionally and personally. To achieve this, one may adopt various approaches that include tools, techniques, processes, and practices involving self-reflection, assessment, and establishment of a life-vision plan that incorporates one's personal and professional goals. In this research, the focus is on the use of reflections as a means to align one's personal and professional values by making an individual aware of where they are in life's journey and how they might increase the quality of that journey.

The idea of reflection originated with the seminal work of John Dewey in the early 20th century, who suggested that reflection for learning should include recalling the event and then posing questions to explore why things turned out the way they did and what possible outcomes could have given a different outcome. In the field of teaching, this is critical. For teachers, what they do and how they behave in the classroom should be well thought out and meaningful, based on theory and practice. Being critical, reflective on teaching experiences, and

motivated to bring change and improvement are essential for teachers' professional development.

The term "English as a Foreign Language" (EFL) refers to non-native speakers studying English in countries where English is not the primary language. EFL is different from English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as an Additional Language (EAL), terms used to describe the teaching or learning of the language by non-native speakers of the language in English-speaking countries. Professional development of EFL teachers entails constantly seeking answers to concerns that occur as a result of the ever-changing educational scenario, and the requirement of continuous training to stay up-to-date with advances in language teaching and learning. However, the use of reflecting journaling by EFL teachers in terms of effectiveness and efficacy has not yet been adequately explored when given the opportunity to critically reflect on the classroom processes in their own contexts.

## Literature Review

The majority of academic research in foreign language teaching has mostly focused on the ideas and practices of foreign language teaching. Researchers are interested in learning content (what to teach) and teaching methods (how to teach), but few are interested in understanding the agents of teaching (who teaches). With the shifting of focus from language to pedagogy in foreign language education, some crucial variables such as personal growth and professional development have garnered a lot of attention in academia which has gradually been deepened through research. Reflective thinking as a method of “learning to teach,” provides a steady stream of fresh ideas for the professional development of foreign language teachers.

Richards and Farrell (2005) identified four broad categories of professional development activities: institutional, group-based, one-on-one, and individual activities. They are further sub-categorised into workshops, self-monitoring activities, reflective journal, teacher support groups, peer observation critical incident analysis, and action research. As a result, developing new skills and expanding knowledge are two of the most important reasons why educators attempt to attend professional development activities (Bailey et al., 2001).

Journal writing as a reflective practice not only prepares teachers in the field of teaching but may also help prospective teachers as pre-service teachers could narrate their learning experiences through writing (Bolton, 2010). Pre-service teachers adopt the reflective journaling method to help gain professional knowledge, establish their identities, beliefs, and metaphors as well as bring a variety of experiences, assumptions, and beliefs about teaching and learning with them. Notwithstanding the fact that pre-service teachers find it a cumbersome task to be accomplished given their workload, it definitely builds up their critical analysis and thinking skills and prepares them for their future endeavour (Khanjani et al., 2018). Critical thinking benefits problem solving, creativity, and teamwork which are essential for teachers’ professional development as well as self-growth (Carosotto, 2017). Reflective journaling helps in enhancing critical thinking abilities not only in teaching aspects but also in lesson planning, checking the challenges they have faced during

the teaching process. Together with promoting holistic development, reflective journaling provides an avenue for teachers to check their teaching abilities (Moradkhani et al., 2017); realize their teaching philosophy (Glogger et al., 2012); build up their own professional and metaphorical identity (Abednia et al., 2013) which are essential prerequisites to be a more effective and competent teacher of the century.

Reflective journaling as a method of reflective thinking can help teachers including foreign language ones too, gain a better understanding of teaching and identify issues in teaching, allowing them to make better plans for improvement (Shandomo, 2010). However, because teachers differ in their ability to reflect, it is critical to provide them the necessary training to help them improve their ability to reflect (Liu & Zhang, 2014). As an example, teachers may be requested to examine various teaching journals in order to identify reflective sentences in them, or they may be tasked with reflective activities so that they can learn how to write teaching journal. Also, journal writing for the reflective practice helped pre-service teachers to rebuild their professional identity in their community of teaching practice. It helped develop their autonomy, self-efficacy, competence, and confidence in teaching which leads to better job performance. For example, a survey of eight pre-service teachers in a study conducted by Dumlao & Pinatacan (2019) revealed that their teaching knowledge in EFL context resulted in them adapting and changing their teaching approaches due to which they struggled on how to teach their students.

Some studies found that reflective journal writing was time-consuming in evaluating teachers’ performance (Lakshmi, 2012; Liu & Milman, 2010). Because teachers are fixed with their teaching schedules, most of them do not participate in reflective activities as they perceive it as burdensome on their teaching practice (Burgoyne & Chuppa-Cornell, 2018). They presume that anything that draws teachers away from direct engagement is viewed unfavourably by teachers. Added to that studies have also found that it is difficult to qualify which of those reflections have occurred during the teaching practice (Gould & Taylor, 2017).

Teachers are regarded as the most influential individuals in the classroom, with the authority to control the type of classroom interaction that

occurs, which is influenced by a number of interrelated elements. For an EFL teacher, the purpose of classroom management is to establish an environment in which students can meaningfully interact in English, allowing them to improve in their English learning (Wichadee, 2011). Decision-makers of educational institutions in most of the non-English speaking countries of the world, like the faculty members and administrators, are of the belief that anyone who speaks a language can teach it. Added to that the cross-country comparisons of English-language ability, as measured by the standardized tests such as TOEFL or IELTS have revealed a decline in competitiveness in many countries (Jones, 2015).

### **Awareness**

The findings from multiple research on this topic, done in various EFL teaching environments, have demonstrated that reflective practices are an effective means of learning about teaching and play a crucial role in teachers' professional development as well as personal growth. Reflective journals serve as a valid tool for enhancing teachers' involvement, and in improving their performance during teaching (Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2018). Soodmand & Hosseini (2019) in their study found that collaborative journal writing was more favored than individualized reflective journals.

Teachers should be taught how to write effectively. The emphasis should be on connecting teaching content with thought processes and self-awareness, not on describing what was observed or what was done. A format for entries should be established after reviewing skills of reflection and providing written examples of reflective writing. Teachers should be assisted in making connections between prior knowledge and new information, to reflect on what they thought at the time of the incident (reflection-in-action) versus what they thought after scrutinizing the situation (reflection-on-action).

Examining the context and not the content of thoughts, feelings, and actions are what is necessary for reflective journaling. The idea is to look for precedents and consequences of events, decisions, and actions and to strike a balance between introspective skepticism and

trust concerns. Thus, exploring the feasible rather than the probable will help in developing fresh ideas and understandings. For teachers of foreign language, contents for effective training/workshops on reflective practices should be made available on a regular basis to deal with their concern of contents of teaching material or language skills and linguistics the most (Wichadee, 2011).

Setting parameters for journal content, length, and frequency of submission is of paramount importance to ease the extent and burden on both the teacher filling it and the supervisor checking it. Emphasis should be on quality rather than quantity with the use of correct grammar and terminology with ensuring timely comments and feedback from supervisors.

Teachers should have the liberty to express their thoughts, anxieties, and frustrations without the fear of being judged or scoring fewer points. They should be assured of the confidentiality of all entries supported by resourceful feedback that will assist them in gaining insights and pursuing needed information.

### **Possible interventions**

A reflective journal is a representation of a professional's work in progress and more essentially an opportunity for reflection on the learning experience. As is applicable in any profession where reflection matters, for teachers of foreign language, there is no right or wrong way of presenting the journal. It should take account of personal experience, preferred learning style, and one's independent research focus. A review of the literature shows that not much has been researched on the efficiency and efficacy of the use of reflective journals in the professional development and self-growth in the context of teachers of foreign language. This is because teachers of foreign languages must be prepared to teach a diverse group of students with varying levels of interest, motivation, and ability, some of whom may require special support, and these behavioral qualities are claimed to affect students' capacity to learn the foreign language. The effectiveness of the use of reflective journaling becomes of paramount importance therefore as the teachers need to analyse students' needs and talents on a class-by-class, basis, and respond to those requirements with preparedness (Borg, 2006).

Teachers' self-efficacy connotes belief in their ability to effectively handle the tasks, obligations, and challenges related to their professional activity which plays a key role in influencing important academic outcomes and well-being in the working environment. As evident from the literature review, the use of reflective journals as a reflective practice has been connected to a variety of benefits in the classroom including job satisfaction, improving interpersonal relationships between students and teachers, as well as within teachers themselves thereby making sense of the interplay and boosting educators' self-efficacy views.

Teachers of EFL should be given more attention since they require a variety of sources, materials, and publications that incorporate the ideas of reflective journaling, professional development as self-efficacy into their syllabus. Furthermore, reflective practice and professional development activities should be included in both in-service and pre-service teacher training programs.

## Conclusion

Having years of experience doesn't guarantee expert teaching. It is continuous self-reflection and periodic modification of classroom techniques to better serve the needs of the students is that make the journey worthwhile. The experience of foreign language teachers is different from that of teachers of other subjects because of the nature of the subject matter itself, the interaction patterns necessary to provide instruction, the challenge of increasing their knowledge of the subject, isolation. (Borg, 2006). As Fullan (1993) puts it, setting policy, establishing standards, and monitoring performance are all responsibilities of policymakers. But one can't legislate what counts to achieve essential educational goals because what really matters for complicated transformation goals are skills, creative thinking, and devoted action. Mandates are insufficient and the more one tries to cut them down, the narrower the aims and means become.

Although reflective teaching is an important tool for pre-service and in-service teachers' professional growth in the field, studies in this area focused on reflective journaling in the context of foreign language teaching are limited. The lack of empirical studies on preservice teachers teaching in a foreign classroom may

result in a significant gap in the literature between theoretical and empirical investigations. Also in the given timeframe, only the most relevant and freely available literature was researched for this study.

To ensure proper implementation and guidance in journal writing, curriculum designers could take into account reflective journal courses to facilitate EFL teachers' development, learning, and instruction. On these premises, future research may explore the effect and impact of reflective journals in foreign language teaching certificate programs, considering reflective journaling is a time-consuming process.

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