# A Qualitative Meta-Synthesis of Studies on Learner Reflections: Lessons for English Language Learner Reflection

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| Article Information | Abstract |
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| | *While reflection has been a common tool for examining the development of teaching and learning practices in the classroom, its use in a language learning setting is still peripheral and minimal. To understand the potential of reflection in supporting language learning, this study presents a qualitative meta-synthesis on selected studies. These studies consider students' reflection as the main object of inquiry. Ten studies from various disciplines in higher education were analyzed through iterative reading and review. Three categories emerged, which dealt with the research underpinnings of the studies, the participants and context, and the benefits of reflection. These categories were then discussed to provide practical implications for the integration of reflection as a primary learning tool in a language classroom, whilst being cognizant of known issues, such as language learners experiencing difficulties when having to express thought.* |

## INTRODUCTION

Student reflection has been considered a viable learning approach across various disciplines in higher education (for nursing education see Reljić, Pajnkihar, & Fekonja, 2019; medical education, see Chun, Yoo, & Cha, 2018; pre-service teachers of mathematics, see Wickstrom et al., 2018; the English language, see Yuan & Mak, 2018). It is a useful source of information to assess student knowledge, as well as for monitoring learner progress and perception, and the suitability of pedagogical approaches (Silver, 2013). In the broader field of English language education, student reflection is an integral facet of those learning to become language teachers. Not only are reflective practices useful to situate future teachers' teaching epistemologies, but they are also intersections between identities or conflicts between expectations and circumstances (see Mann & Walsh, 2017; Loo, Trakulkasemsuk, & Jimarkon Zilli, 2017).

Nonetheless, minimal studies have examined reflective practices of language learners who

are developing their language proficiency. A reason for this may be students' low levels of language proficiency, hindering them to be engaged in reflective practices, especially when students are expected to express their thoughts in spoken or written form of a language they are currently learning (see Luu, 2010). Despite the challenges posed by low English language proficiency, reflective practices may actually serve as a catalyst for the development students communicative abilities (Afshar & Rahimi, 2016). To see how this is possible, this study will take a step back by looking at what reflection is all about. To achieve this, this study will conduct a qualitative meta-synthesis on student reflection. With the purpose of providing a meta view, studies with different teaching and learning purposes and contexts that represent a variety of reflective frameworks are examined.

In the next sections, we will discuss reflection, reflection in higher education and professional development, the assessment of reflection, as well as a discussion of the analytical procedure employed in this study. This will be followed by an explanation of qualitative meta-analysis – the methodology employed in this study, and the subsequent findings and discussions.

## Origins and understandings of reflection

Reflective practices in higher education, by both educators and students, have been considered an integral teaching and learning approach. Reflection not only fosters critical thinking, but it also calls for the examination and (critical) evaluation of meaning-making process in the classroom and beyond the realm of education (see Rogers, 2001; Ryan, 2013). The origins of reflective practices can be traced back to notable philosophers such as Descartes, who called for the examination of epistemology; Kant, who promoted the autonomous learner seeking to be enlightened; Dewey, who valued the experience of being reflective; and Horkheimer and Adorno, whose urged for the deconstruction and questioning of 'rationality' (Procee, 2006). In higher education, reflective practices have been guided by the work of Schön (1983, as cited in Ryan, 2013), whose notion of bridging theory and practice has laid the foundation for learning that focuses thinking whilst doing (reflection-in-action), and thinking about doing (reflection-on-action). When thinking about doing, recent scholars have also posited that when reflection is done dialogically, it may have implications that extend beyond the personal level to the broader context (see also Giroux, 1988; Mezirow, 2006).

## Student reflection in higher education

In higher education, when tasked to reflect upon one's learning processes and experience, there are various constructs that need to be considered. Rogers (2001) presents an encompassing account of reflective practices utilized in higher education. Specifically, useful reflective practice is a process that involves a careful consideration of the learning context, as well as the antecedents prior to the act of reflecting, and the identification of the type of reflection to be done. The process of reflecting can take place in different forms, such as in journals and (e-)portfolios, or through dialogue with either peers or teachers, or both (see Ryan, 2015).

Reflection has also been identified through different terms, such as a process to develop

metacognition (see model by McAlpine et al., 1999), or an awareness of self and of one's surroundings (see Romainville, 1994). While different terms have been used to discuss reflection or reflecting in different learning contexts, reflection in higher education typically involves the following (Suskie, 2004): discussing and evaluating one's problem solving strategies; critically examining and evaluating the bases for one's arguments; correcting or revising one's reasoning or arguments when self-examination so warrants; forming efficient plans for completing work; evaluating the effectiveness of one's actions.

To encourage meaningful reflection, explicit instruction is necessary. This is because reflection is not a natural process, and students may not be used to introspecting on their learning progress. As such, scaffolding is required, especially for students new to teaching and learning approaches in higher education. Furthermore, the teaching of reflection is necessary as it will set a purpose for reflection in a learning environment. This will avoid the risks, such as meaningless efforts to 'write for the instructor' (Dyment & O'Connell, 2011; see also Creme, 2005). There are several approaches to consider, for instance, in developing academic writing competency, Ryan (2011) proposes the Academic Reflective Writing Model – which aims to examine the structure of academic texts, and the linguistics resources used to convey meaning. In another approach to support experiential learning, Jordi (2011) outlines 9 elements which should be taught and be apparent in a reflection. These are, to seek integration; to make meaning; to understand unique moments; to have an intentional consciousness (of actions and of thought); to have imagination; to know internal rhythm (an awareness of self and how self responds to externalities); to make meaning relationally (with other social entities); to actively listen and dialogue; and to work with others.

Reflection also needs to account for the broader context where it occurs – beyond the classroom. The context for reflection may be guided by a task, a learning environment, or even community or culture where a reflector finds him- or herself. As posted by Rogers (2001), "(r)eflection may be influenced by the developmental situation itself, by factors within the individual, and by factors present within the larger environment. Thus, the reflective process appears most likely to be successful when both individual and environmental factors are managed so that the context provides an appropriate balance of challenge and support." (p.43). Having the context aligned with students' learning will provide an allowance for transformational learning, wherein students' learning trajectory will not be confined to events that had transpired in a lesson or in a classroom; instead, they would consider dynamic human encounters as a result from interaction and meaning-making with their peers and with experiences outside of the university wall (Jordi, 2011). In such a manner, students will also be attuned to atypical or novel encounters, and have more willingness to reflect (Rogers, 2001).

**Reflection for professional development**

Reflection is most commonly used when students are to apply knowledge in practical ways. This is seen through various modes of learning where students experience hands-on applications in professional or community settings, especially when evaluating the application of theory in practice. When reflecting while being engaged in professional practice, Schön's (1983, as cited in Ryan, 2013) work has been the most influential, in particular the notions of reflection-in-

action and reflection-on-action. The former entails thinking whilst doing, with thinking being considered part of doing; the latter represents thinking after an action or a task has been done as a way to evaluate the process of doing, or to examine whether modifications are necessary for future similar actions (Brockbank & McGill, 2007). When reflection-on-action is conducted critically, that is, when others are involved in the reflection process, learning becomes more active. The involvement of others in a reflection may invite feedback on completed actions and suggestions for future ones. It is believed that when reflection is done critically, multiple perspectives of knowing may be established, or an understanding of how one's practice may have a broader impact (Ryan & Ryan, 2015). When there is critical reflection, transformative learning may take place, where existing assumptions are questioned and are possibly modified or expanded (Brockbank & McGill, 2007; Bursaw, Kimber, Mercer, & Carrington, 2015).

Aside from the professional context, there are other modes of learning in higher education where reflection holds a pivotal role. For instance, community engagement through service learning provides students to extend what is learned in the classroom to what their surrounding communities. To gauge the type of learning, and to assess the learning that transpires, studies have utilized reflection (see Hébert & Hauf, 2015). Hébert and Hauf (2015) found that integrating and tracking experiential learning through reflection contributed to students' personal growth and their academic achievement (see also Harvey, Coulson, McMaugh, 2016; Masika & Jones, 2016). More than this, reflection is in itself a pivotal step one must take when being engaged in service to the community. As stated by Caspersz and Olaru (2017, p.686), "[r]eflection lies at the core of service-learning because reflecting can foster a 'critical self' that questions the status quo (or what is known) to develop 'solutions' that are grounded in formal knowledge and skills." When students are able to situate the self within the context of their service, only then will a sense of self-responsibility be nurtured, leading to a potential transformation in their purpose to learn and to serve.

## Assessing reflection

While assessment can be made on the outcome of reflection (i.e. a reflective piece such as a journal entry or a written narration), assessment can also be made on the process of reflecting. Brockbank and McGill (2007) propose that the following need to be in place for assessment to be carried out on a reflection and the process of reflecting:

1.  Evidence that a reflective dialogue has occurred (either with the self or with someone else, or other people);
2.  Evidence that the person reflecting had an active part in the reflection (not merely describing an event or a task);
3.  Evidence that there is a form of development that occurs over time, visible through different reflections
4.  Evidence that the person reflecting had not only thought about his or her actions, but also review these actions as a way to evaluate their suitability, and potential application in other similar contexts
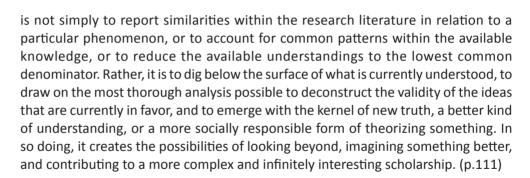
Based on the types of observations one should consider when evaluating reflection, we may assume that there are times when reflection is done minimally. Even when reflection is done thoroughly, what is reflected upon may be different, resulting in differentiated outcomes. For instance, Barnhart and van Es (2015) reported that participants (pre-service teachers) who took a class on examining students' thinking were able to notice issues pertinent to their teaching and the students' learning environment. Nonetheless, the level of noticing was not similar, as there were dimensions which illustrated the participants' types of noticing. When noticing occurs at low sophistication, teachers recall certain classroom incidents, most of which are the teaching employed by the teachers themselves. Low sophistication also does not result in teachers utilizing students' thought for planning for future lessons, or attempting to understand students' learning circumstances. On the other hand, those who exhibited high sophistication were able to link previous observations with current ones; or identify specific actions that were observed and anticipating how these actions may be attended to in the future.

The context in which reflection takes place may also affect the quality of reflection. As discussed by Leijen, Valtna, Leijen, and Pedaste (2012), dance students who were enrolled in different dance classes (with different learning objectives) reflected on different aspects of their craft – some focused on movements and techniques while others focused on the intended interpretation of a dance and the audience's understanding. More than this, they also reported that the presence of others in the reflection process will also have a bearing. For instance, having peer feedback may encourage the students to be more objective in reflecting on their performance, rather than leaving one to reflect on his or her own. Another variable worth considering is the tool used to support and examine reflection. For example, conducting reflection verbally through interaction allows a person to be more candid, as well as for clarification to be sought after; reflection in the form of written narration, on the other hand, removes the perspectives of readers or listeners, which results in narrator's voice to be foregrounded (Mann & Walsh, 2017).

### Reflecting on reflection: A meta-synthesis approach

Qualitative meta-synthesis is an approach that has been employed for to synthesize qualitative studies from various areas, such as public health (e.g. McCormack, Karlsson, Dewing, & Lerdal, 2010), social work (e.g. Hodge & Horvath, 2011), criminal justice (e.g. Moeller, Copes, & Hochstetler, 2016), education (e.g. Aspfors & Fransson, 2015), as well as in environment economics (e.g. Carlson & Palmer, 2016). In the area of reflection, the plethora of studies, as mentioned in the introduction, has opportuned us with a great deal of perspectives and contexts to consider as fundamentals when being engaged in reflection, or when attempting to study reflection. To ensure studies further contribute to the understanding of reflection, a meta-synthesis becomes necessary. This approach allows us to view a topic of interest from an encompassing lense, with an understanding guided by the "interpretative explanations of the phenomenon" (Jensen & Allen, 1996, p.554), whose purpose is not to aggregate findings, but to acknowledge that experiences are constructed and understood in multiple perspectives. As such, the act of synthesizing a body of qualitative research also challenges the notion that qualitative studies are context-specific, and are thus ungeneralizable (Sandelowski, Docherty, & Emden, 1997). Paterson, Thorne, Canam, and Jillings (2001) explain that a qualitative meta-synthesis

is not simply to report similarities within the research literature in relation to a particular phenomenon, or to account for common patterns within the available knowledge, or to reduce the available understandings to the lowest common denominator. Rather, it is to dig below the surface of what is currently understood, to draw on the most thorough analysis possible to deconstruct the validity of the ideas that are currently in favor, and to emerge with the kernel of new truth, a better kind of understanding, or a more socially responsible form of theorizing something. In so doing, it creates the possibilities of looking beyond, imagining something better, and contributing to a more complex and infinitely interesting scholarship. (p.111)

To conduct a meta-synthesis, there are several approaches to consider. Sandelowski, Docherty, and Emden (1997) propose the following: integrating findings from different analytical procedures on the same phenomenon by the same researchers; the combination of different researchers' analyses of a set of findings for the goal of creating narratives concerning a phenomenon. An outcome of this may be the metaphors invoked through the analyses of the same qualitative findings; a third approach is to use quantitative means to aggregate qualitative findings. While there are different possible approaches, the steps in conducting a qualitative meta-synthesis (relevant especially to the first and second approach) are similar, despite explicated differently. In the following section, the steps for conducting a qualitative meta-synthesis are presented, based on the works of Jensen and Allen (1996), Sandelowski, Docherty, and Emden (1997), and Walsh and Downe (2005).

First, data for a qualitative meta-synthesis need to be carefully thought over. Some essential considerations are the comparability and discrepancies of studies selected, in terms of the phenomenon, event, or experience that is the point for study. Other considerations include the research questions, framework, and findings. It is important, at this initial step, that the quality of a research is insignificant; instead, focus should be placed on the goal of the meta-synthesis. Also worth considering is the number of studies to be included. It is recognized that qualitative studies will contain a wealth of information; hence, relying on a sample size that is too large will hamper any deep analyses. Sandelowski, Docherty, and Emden (1997) suggest that about 10 studies representative of a large topic should suffice. Even so, a clear explanation of the manner in which the representative studies are selected should be included.

After determining an ample amount of topically similar studies, the methodologies of these studies will need to be compared. This step is crucial in identifying any unique particulars, for instance, the manner in which data is collected or how it is interpreted. At this stage, researches need to be aware that they need to account for differences and not be at risk of aggregating studies unnecessarily. As such, constructs that are presented in the selected studies need to be represented accurately.

The final step involves a dialectic analysis, where the constructs found across selected studies are determined for possible links. The links may then be represented through concepts, phrases, categories, or even metaphors. At this point, it is vital that researchers maintain their synthesis "in the discovery of human phenomena or experiences as they are lived and perceived by subjects, rather than in the verification of a priori conceptions of those experiences.

… a meta-synthesis is rooted in the original data and is credible when it re-presents such faithful descriptions or interpretations of human experience that the people having that experience would immediately recognize it from the descriptions or interpretations as their own." (Jensen & Allen, 1996, p.556).

## THE STUDY

In this section, we will first contextualize the notion of reflection in the area of language learning. This is necessary as it will provide a premise to support the methodological parameters that were decided for our study.

### Reflection in language learning

Reflection is an integral aspect of language learning. In language learning, reflection has been examined though specific constructs such as engagement or awareness. When students are reflecting on their learning, it is said that students are engaged with the teaching and learning experience. This involves students being "responsible for their own learning, making decisions about how they go about learning in addition to deciding what they want to learn and how they want to use that learning" (Silver, 2013, p.3). Another construct pertinent to reflecting about language learning is developing and having language awareness. Svalberg (2007; 2016) discusses language awareness as a complex meaning-making process involved in the applications and transference of language knowledge to skill; the thought processes of how one learns; and the noticing of features or functions of a language. A related, but perhaps broader term that is related to language awareness is metacognition. This term, in education research, represents students' thinking processes, such as their decision-making, use of learning strategies, and etc. (see de Andrés Martínez, 2012; Silver, 2013; Haukås, Bjørke, & Dypedahl, 2018). These specific constructs contribute to the notion of reflection in learning; nonetheless, a distinction of term persists as reflection, especially in the area of language learning, has been used almost exclusively to refer to the act of reflecting, and also a dominant construct to examine the professionalism of language educators. While reflection is represented through a variety of discursive modes (written or oral), the act of reflection is in itself supported by discourse, seen through the process of articulating one's thought (Farrell, 2018). An anticipated problem for language learners would then be their ability to express, as completely and as accurately, their thoughts (see Luu, 2010; Afshar & Rahimi, 2016).

Aside from the learning context, we must also consider the researchers' stance, which will be discussed later in this section. Since we are also taking on the responsibility of interpreting the selected studies, we are aware that our understanding and the representation of our discussion may be influenced by our own subjectivities, as cautioned by Timulak (2014). To address this caveat, we attempted to be transparent our analysis and synthesis of the data. Transparency in qualitative studies calls for researchers to be self-reflexive, in that changes, challenges, and potential are surfaced honestly in academic communication (Timulak, 2014).

**Data collection**

The observations presented above then served as a guide for data selection and the subsequent analysis. Data were retrieved from Google Scholar with search terms representative of the research aim. The initial terms used for identifying studies on the reflection English language learners were, 'reflection', 'reflecting', 'language learning', and 'higher education'. However, the combination of these terms yielded studies on the reflection and reflective practices of English language pre-service teachers. The interest of this study, on the other hand, was on students who were learning English. The subsequent removal of 'language learning' then surfaced studies that employed reflection as the main objective of inquiry among students from various disciplines, including several that were conducted in the English classroom.

Aside from topical parameters, there were also other criteria for inclusion or exclusion. These criteria were informed by the study by Aspfors and Fransson (2015). In our study, papers that were excluded were those that considered reflection as a secondary activity to supplement another form of learning; studies that investigated the effects of reflection on other classroom processes; studies that utilized quantitative approaches for analysis and interpretation of reflection. The context of reflection was also considered in the data selection process. Since we were interested to see the purpose and implementation of reflection in a learning setting, studies that involved participants in professional settings (e.g. pre-service teachers or medical students completing housemanship) were not included. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that it is impossible to have complete isolation from observations gleaned from professional settings; hence, there were a few studies whose class activities involved learning from case studies or experiences of professionals in their respective fields (e.g. Adamson & Dewar, 2015). To ensure that we had a representation of studies on reflection, we also considered the reflective tools that were utilized (e.g. visual reflection, narration, (online) discussion boards, and webforms).

In terms of deciding upon a suitable number of studies to analyze, the review of qualitative meta-synthesis methodology did not yield any specific numbers. Published studies which employed qualitative meta-synthesis as an approach are also divergent in the number of studies that were analyzed (see Table 1). We were thus guided by the criteria we had set, as explained in the previous paragraph.

**Table 1**
**Area of study, researchers, and the corresponding number of studies synthesized**

| Area of Study / Researchers | Number of Studies Synthesized |
| --- | --- |
| Public Health (McCormack, Karlsson, Dewing, & Lerdal, 2010) | 4 |
| Social Work (Hodge & Horvath, 2011) | 11 |
| Criminal Justice (Moeller, Copes, & Hochstetler, 2016) | 17 |
| Education (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015) | 10 |
| Environment Economics (Carlson & Palmer, 2016) | 49 |

With the topical parameters and criteria in place, we finally decided upon 10 qualitative studies. In the final selection of articles for meta-analysis, we believe that these selected studies illustrated a myriad of reflective tools available to both students and teachers, as well as the year of publication (the time when the study was conducted and published was not an issue as the notion of reflection remains similar). The discipline and context of these selected studies, the authors and year of publication, are presented in Table 2.
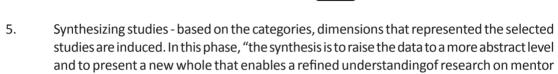
**Table 2**
**Discipline and context of studies analyzed for student reflection**

| Discipline/Context | Number of Studies |
|---|:---:|
| Nursing (Adamson & Dewar, 2015; Schmidt & Brown, 2016) | 2 |
| Geography (Haigh, 2001) | 1 |
| Computer Science (Fekete, Kay, Kingston, & Wimalaratne, 2000) | 1 |
| Business Administration (Human Resources; Management) (Brown, 1998; Masika & Jones, 2016) | 2 |
| Intercultural Education (Jackson, 2011) | 1 |
| University (Study Experiences of Students) (Power, 2016; Morrison, 1996; Everett, 2017) | 3 |
| **Total** | 10 |

## Data analysis

The data analysis procedure reflects our earlier discussion on qualitative meta-synthesis. The procedure is also informed by the study of Aspfors and Fransson (2015), who conducted a qualitative meta-synthesis of mentor education and newly qualified teachers. Their qualitative meta-synthesis procedure consisted of six phases, seen in the following:

1.     Conception of synthesis - the research aim of the current study is grounded i minimal studies on reflection (as the main object of inquiry) of language learners (see Context in previous section)

2.     Identifying target studies for meta-synthesis - the process of deciding which studies to include (and later exclude after deeper reading) for meta-synthesis (see Data Collection in previous section)

3.     Reading and evaluating of studies - deep reading and critical evaluation of selected studies for the purpose of discerning uniqueness and providing accurate summary (see Table 2)

4.     Drawing links between studies - through open coding, categories were gleaned from the selected studies. While studies may share categories, the explication of these categories will be rendered through excerpts or particular findings/discussions from the selected studies. This phase is done manually and discussed between the researchers.

5.  Synthesizing studies - based on the categories, dimensions that represented the selected studies are induced. In this phase, "the synthesis is to raise the data to a more abstract level and to present a new whole that enables a refined understanding of research on mentor education in relation to previous research" (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015, p.80)
6.  Presenting the synthesis - the synthesis is written out with texts from the selected studies, infused with the interpretation and stance of the researchers (see Findings and Discussion in next section)

## Researchers' stance

Before we discuss the categories, we believe it is necessary for us to divulge our researcher subjectivity. To understand how our subjectivity may affect how we interpret data, we referred to Berger's (2015) study on researcher's position and reflexivity in doing a qualitative study. His study proposes the understanding of one's context, or personal or professional history before, during, and after doing a qualitative research. In these different phases, it is necessary for a reiterated reading and reviewing, with questions delving into potential reasons for the manner in which data is understood. When conceptualizing this research, both of us were aware of the positive disposition we held towards reflection. It is a common task employed in our classrooms. We were then optimistic that reflection is noteworthy for our teaching practice. Nonetheless, reflection has always taken a 'back seat' in our English language classes – even though reflection may be one of the tasks students need to complete, they do not contribute significantly to the assessment of students, especially in first or second year courses. Furthermore, reflection is typically a part of 'participation' (together with attendance). This served as another justification for conducting this research, that is, to see how we can engage in reflection more meaningfully. Having clarified our sentiments, the next sections will present the emergent categories from the synthesis of selected studies, followed by the possible applications in a language learning setting.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Telling stories in 'full' or in clusters

The first emergent category is the telling of stories as a whole, through interpretive methods to create a (re)narration, or in clusters, presented through several themes. This category represents the research underpinnings of the selected studies, seen through the approaches used to understand students' reflections. Most of the studies that were synthesized told a re-narrated story (n=7), while the remaining told stories in clusters, with each cluster addressing a particular theme. Those that presented a re-narrated story used an interpretative method. There are several reasons for this. First, these studies dealt with matters related to learning with no preconceived assumptions. These studies presented learning situations which were novel, such as that seen in the study by Fekete, Kay, Kingston, and Wimalaratne (2000), where reflective tasks were introduced in classes on computer programming which had a large number of students.

"The important role of reflection follows from its role in assisting students to develop metacognitive skills: these are the skills involved in thinking about learning and learning how to go about learning successfully. This includes the knowledge and skills required to assess when one knows something." (p.144).

Studies which provided re-narrations also considered individual perspectives or addressed larger learning goals. For instance, in Power's (2016) study, students were encouraged to reflect as a way to be critically engaged with their studies to facilitate success. Power commented,

"I was able to more clearly link students' work to course outcomes and had the impression that students were becoming aware of the level of critical engagement needed to achieve the success they expected from their college careers. The sheer amount of relevant data for has this changed the way I think? was further evidence of this." (p.246).

Aside from coming to know students' learning development, teachers were also able to see the efficacy of their teaching and learning activities, or the reflective tasks, seen also in the study by Adamson and Dewar (2015) which looked at the value of reflection in nursing education.

"Stories are a way to facilitate this reflection on one's own beliefs and values. As part of this nursing module students were presented with personal accounts of patients, relatives, students and staff member's personal experiences which challenged their beliefs, for example about patients feeling able to ask questions and the equal importance of the family in the care giving relationship. The stories raised issues such as how it feels to be in hospital and an understanding about the use and impact of healthcare terminology for the patient and their relatives." (p.160).

What is also seen in Adamson and Dewar's (2015) study is the use of (professional) experiences to spur reflection. While students may not yet be part of the professional workforce in their fields, the use of experiences from the workplace may a starting point for the linking of theory to practice, and for students to be faced with situations which may contradict their formative or existing beliefs.

Studies which presented clusters of stories, on the other hand, aimed to reflect dimensions of a particular construct that was being observed in the students' learning setting (the research setting). For example, in Masika and Jones' (2016) study, Wenger's (1999) social learning theory was used to understand students' reflection. With the framework, the researchers were able to see students' engagement with their courses, with their peers and lecturers, as well as their perception towards working as a team.

"We argue that CoP play an important role in fostering a sense of belonging and engaging student in learning. Generally, participants in all focus groups were engaged with their learning and course with the data suggesting that the key dimensions of Wenger's (1999) social learning theory (meaning, identity, community and practice) were in place for most learners." (p.147).

Clusters of stories were also told through thematization of related lessons. In particular, studies analyzed students' reflective practices that were observed over a period where a specific thinking or learning skill pertinent to a concept was taught. For instance, in Haigh's (2001) study on geography students who were learning about Gaia Theory, sessions 2-3 consisted of lessons where students were to learn about "Case studies and scientific evidence for (geophysiciological processes) – biologically modulated environmental regulation at various scales; ocean salinity, atmospheres, Amazonia, soils" (p.174). In these lessons, the learning process for students focused on cognitive dissonance, for "building and detailing the repertoire of 'exceptions' to establish understanding that provide the intellectual challenge that the learner must resolve" (p.174). 'Cognitive dissonance' was the umbrella term to analyze the reflections that students provided during this period. This later changed once a new series of lessons was introduced to teach a new concept.

## Self and others, learning materials

A second category that emerged from the synthesis of the study was the interaction of students. This interaction may be students' internal dialogue (with the self), such as the questioning of beliefs upon being presented with contradicting ones; or a recount of interaction between self with peers or teachers, where insights are drawn from meaning making; or observations of interaction the context of learning. These interactions were reflected upon across all the selected studies, regardless of the number of students whose reflections were studies, where numbers of students ranged from 1 (case study; Jackson, 2011) to about 700 students, who were enrolled in courses on computer programming (Fekete, Kay, Kingston, & Wimalaratne, 2000).

In engaging with self, there were different constructs that were discussed. For instance, in Masika and Jones' (2016) study, students reflected upon gaining more confidence in interacting with others, even when having to address a potentially sensitive issue, such as non-compliance by peers.

Increasing confidence also engaged students with their learning and learner identity development within evolving CoP. The locus and mechanics of confidence-building reside in a number of different activities, accomplishments, achievements in Wenger's (2009) interconnected learning components of belonging, becoming, experience and doing in interacting productively for learning purposes. One described their growth in confidence supplanting initial reservations:

> "There will always be someone who didn't want to do the work or they weren't doing it properly or they'd wait until the last minute to hand it in, so, say, if I was leading in that group, then, I'd have less time to kind of put it all together and really go over it and evaluate it. And so, that made it a bit more difficult. But the weird thing is that even though they're kind of affecting the group, you still don't really want to tell them like, point a finger and really just get into it. But just over time, I've got more confident in telling them, 'Can you just do your work? Because we need it.' So, yeah, I think I adjusted myself in terms of dealing with these people who didn't

want to work. I became less, like, apprehensive about getting firmer with people." (FG2, Student 2) (p.146)

Aside from becoming more confident, students were also reported to develop more self-awareness, such as that discussed by Morrison (1996).

> "Reflective practice, rooted in the individual student's terms, can bring continuity and coherence to potentially fragmented modular courses, integrating diverse fields of study into a student's developmental needs." (p.321)

Morrison (1996) also concludes that students with self-awareness, who are able to join the dots between courses they take would have a better sense of applying what they had learned in their classrooms to their future professional practice. The process, however, was not instantaneous; instead, it developed over time and as reported by all studies, reflection had to be scaffolded. Self-awareness was also seen in the study by Power (2016), where an awareness gave rise to students' ability to synthesize information from different learning sources, including feedback they received on their reflection.

> "There were approximately 20 students in each class. Students were expected to complete eight journal entries of roughly one page length. Entries were expected to reflect students' analysis and insight into course readings, discussions and other relevant research. Students were given written feedback on their entries at the halfway point in the semester, and after they submitted their final journals through Turnitin (the software educational platform) at the end of the course." (p.242)

Power's (2016) intention of drawing in different sources of learning is to foster critical thinking towards what is being learned, especially when different perspectives, that may lead to ambiguity, exist.

> "Among a range of learner outcomes included in course syllabi, students are expected to practice critical reflection and engagement, evaluate the impact of ambiguities, subtleties and ironies in texts, and demonstrate critical self-evaluation." (p.235)

Aside from considering different perspectives, seemingly negative responses towards a classroom task may also become known through students' reflection, such as that seen in the study of Fekete, Kay, and Wimalaratne (2000).

> "Students do not seem happy with the requirement to fill in planning sheets, so we are trying to improve this aspect. On the other hand they appreciate the explicit detail in the assessment criteria. In student evaluations of the courses that use these methods, over 60% of the class answer the question "How clear were the objectives of this subject" with a score of 4 or 5 out of 5." (p.148)

More than the perception that students may have towards lessons or social entities within a classroom, reflection may also divulge the conditions that are necessary for learning to take

place. This is seen in the study by Jackson (2011) on a student who was taking an intercultural module which required a period of staying abroad.

> "This case study illustrates that a short-term sojourn can have a significant impact on participants *if* critical reflection and experiential learning (e.g. ethnographic research, service-learning) are embedded into the program and the individuals themselves are receptive to personal expansion and committed to enhancing their intercultural knowledge and skills. As well as agency, the degree of host receptivity (openness to 'newcomers') plays a vital role in how sojourns unfold." (p.93)

## Usefulness of reflection

Another category which synthesized the findings of the selected qualitative studies was the positive value placed on reflection as a support for learning students' subject content. Not only was student reflection considered a measure to prepare students for future professional encounters, it also enabled students to be engaged with their lessons at a more critical depth.

For example, in the study by Schmidt and Brown (2016), students' reflections were seen to gain depth as time progressed. In their initial reflections, students wrote about what they had observed and their evaluation of their observations. In time, however, the distinction became less apparent as students intuitively evaluated notions or entities they encounter in their learning.

> "One strategy to help students begin to develop reflective writing is to have them make two columns in their journals. In one column, students record their observations. In the other column, they record their interpretations of the experiences. As their skills progress, students begin to differentiate between observations and reflection. At this point columns can be merged." (p.103)

As the depth of reflection became more critical, students were more open to consider notions which may challenge their existing beliefs, such as that reported by Adamson and Dewar (2015).

> "The content of the discussions indicated that students' prior knowledge and beliefs were challenged. For example, the discussions raised awareness of the importance of clear communication, and also how using jargon can create confusion. Students discussed new understanding such as that they should not assume that relatives understood the hospital routine. A commitment to note this new learning for future practice expressed by students suggested not only learning but an intention to apply this is practice." (p.160)

Perhaps the depth of discussion was cultivated by the different means of reflection, as seen in the study by Everett (2017), where students did both visual and a written narration. The use of a variety of reflective modes supported learning on different planes, seen in the following (pp.629-630):

*Academic engagement*

Academic engagement took the form of critical, creative and reflective thinking.

- The challenges we faced were finding how to express our feelings about all the new things in our lives through pictures and deciding what to say about each slide.
- I liked working as a team because it made the project much more creative. We all worked together, and added ideas from everyone instead of just from one perspective.

*Social engagement*

Social engagement focused on getting more involved and developing friendships.

- This experiential learning project was perfect for the 'first-year experience' class. It really did help me get more involved with my classmates and my school!
- Overall I thought this project was a good way to get us to think and bring us closer with our classmates.
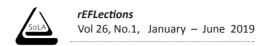
*Personal development and well-being*

The most consistently reported benefit derived from the experience was the personal ways students were affected by the visual narrative project, including overcoming shyness and gaining self-confidence.

- It made me reach out and talk to my classmates and I actually learned a lot about them. This helped me overcome my shyness.
- I think this experiential learning assignment was a great project. I did not think that it was going to benefit me in any way, but after completing the assignment, I have a changed view on my experience here at [the university]. Watching my group's slide show made me realize everything I have conquered at college. I have struggled with living on my own, stress and being very home-sick. Conquering all these obstacles has changed me as an individual and I feel like I can take anything that is thrown at me. I have grown and learned from mistakes, consequences and achievements.

Jackson (2011) also concurs by utilizing a variety of reflection approaches, done with different social entities at different points of time.

> " To be most effective, individual and group reflection should be promoted before, during, and after a sojourn. As well as analyzing their cultural assumptions and level of intercultural sensitivity, participants may hone their comparative thinking skills, and become more responsible for their language and intercultural learning." (pp.92-93)

Different modes may be necessary to achieve multivocality. As proposed by Tracy (2010), multivocality is the use of different voices that represent different points of view. This may be achieved through different reflection tools, the re-narration at different times, or by different interlocutors, or the introduction of a new voice or the reorganization of a discourse parameter to support draw out divergent viewpoints. When multivocality is used in reflection, it is also

possible for students' experiences and thoughts to be captured from the broader educational context, seen in the study of Morrison (1996).

> "They indicate that the notion of reflective practice fairly captures the range of concerns that are uppermost in their minds during their period of registration. In this respect the keeping of a learning journal can serve technical, instrumental and professional purposes as well as personal and academic purposes." (p.328)

Despite the value that reflection brought about, researchers also discussed concerns regarding the use of reflection. For instance, Fekete, Kay, Kingston, and Wimalaratne (2000) stated that

> "[i]t is hard to demonstrate the effect of the methods described in this paper, as any observations and measurements are influenced by many other aspects of our courses. We are happy with the way the classes are going, and find that there is little added work for staff in applying these ideas." (p.148)

There are measures to scale the quality of reflection; nonetheless, not many of the selected studies explained how reflection was graded (except for the study by Power (2016)).

## What is the lesson? Reflection for English language learners

From the synthesis of the ten studies, there are some noteworthy characteristics to mention. First, the way reflection is implemented depends partially on the objectives of a course or the students' major. Moreover, the meanings gleaned from reflection are shaped by the perspectives brought by the reader (cf. the teacher) or constructs relevant to the setting. Second, reflection needs to be supported. In almost all of the selected studies, there were instructions on how reflection was taught to students. Though not elaborated expansively, since these studies were not papers on pedagogical methods, researchers did indicate the need to provide students with either example reflections (e.g. Adamson & Dewar, 2015) or reflective prompts (e.g. Jackson, 2011). Next, reflection deepens as time passes. Perhaps due to scaffolding provided by teachers, and as lessons become more complex, reflection also appears to be more critical (e.g. Schmidt & Brown, 2016). Through a better sense of reflection, more is drawn from the learning experiences to reflect upon. As such, interesting insights are regularly introduced (e.g. Power, 2016).

From these observations, there are several issues that need to be considered if reflection is implemented in a language classroom. They are the following, which will be discussed in the next few paragraphs:

- Scope of reflection
- Value of reflection
- Assessment of reflection

As is the case with any learning task, a scope for reflection needs to be defined. As seen in the selected studies, classes that focus on the building of content knowledge may implement

open reflection, in that no particular topic is assigned for reflection, a language classroom may need to identify a particular focus. For instance, if language classes focus on the technicalities of the language, it is then advisable for teachers to present several examples of language use for students to consider. Through the examination of these examples, students then may be able draw insights to create assumptions about form and structure (e.g. the use of stories from professional setting for students to consider in Adamson and Dewar (2015)). Furthermore, while initial reflection may focus on knowledge about the language, there needs to be a progression towards knowledge of how language is used in communicative settings. Another point to consider is the amount of reflection possible in a language classroom. As seen in the study by Fekete, Kay, Kingston, and Wimalaratne (2000), which involved hundreds of students, the reflection was very descriptive. To ensure reflection with depth (and still carry out other teaching responsibilities), teachers can make use of teaching practices or learning activities that provide scaffolding and a safe space for reflection – this essentially calls for students' thinking of their learning tasks of experiences. Other pertinent variables which need consideration by teachers are the length of the reflection, the topic of reflection, means of reflection, the timings of reflection. Reflection may also be conducted in groups, as opposed to as individuals; nonetheless, reflecting in groups may mask issues that may be pivotal for certain individuals in a learning situation (see Rogers, 2001 for further discussion).

Furthermore, for reflection to be carried out meaningfully, there needs to be value placed on reflection throughout the period of its use. Students will need to see that reflection is of value to their learning – that it is directing them somewhere, preferably towards achieving the course goals (e.g. Jackson, 2011). Value on reflection may be seen through the assessment of student reflection to illustrate their academic growth. This may be slightly challenging for the language classrooms, especially when students are at a stage where they are developing their proficiency. In such a setting, teachers may want to prioritize the meaningfulness of the reflection, instead of the accuracy of language use. This will create an environment where communicative abilities take precedence over (correct) language use in isolation. Also, when reflection has a bearing on assessment, students' learning trajectory may be dealt with in a more encompassing way. The assessment of reflection may also position it as a crucial teaching and learning activity, instead of being relegated as a peripheral task – an unfortunate observation in many studies on language teaching and learning (see Dyment & O'Connell, 2011; Leijen et al., 2012).

**FINAL REMARKS**

While this study has provided several essential considerations for the implementation of reflection in a language learning context, future studies could perhaps compare our propositions to reflections that are actually carried out, in particular those that are done in a setting where English is a foreign or second language. These students' instructors' feedback and perspectives may also be valuable in better understanding the use of reflection in an EFL setting.

As seen in the meta-synthesis of the selected studies, reflection has potential usefulness in the language classroom. It not only reveals students' perceptions and experiences in learning, but is also spurs teachers to reflect upon their teaching practices. In other words, while reflection may be useful in language education to gauge students' perception, language development

and ability, it also urges teachers' active involvement in students' learning. More importantly, when integrating reflection, teachers will need to aspire for parity in what they do in their classrooms, so as to avoid relegating reflection as inconsequential – this, only made possible if teachers themselves reflect.

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