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Exploring Japanese EFL Learners' Reflection Skills: Insights from Their Reflections on MOOC-Based Peer Discussions

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Abstract

While reflection is recognized as a critical element in successful learning (Huang, 2021), research suggests that learners often require support to engage in sustained and purposeful reflection (Curry et al., 2023). This research explores aspects of Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Learning Cycle (RLC) that appear in Japanese university students' reflections on peer discussions related to their self-directed learning using Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Reflections were collected over three stages, each representing a different level of scaffolding: (1) non-guided reflection, where students freely described their experiences (Week 1); (2) guided reflection using questions based on Gibbs' RLC (Weeks 2 to 5); and (3) less-guided reflection, where students created and answered their own reflective questions (Weeks 6 and 7). This design aimed to explore the effectiveness of guided reflection and its potential influence on how students engaged in subsequent, more autonomous reflective tasks. A qualitative thematic analysis suggested that, in the non-guided stage, students primarily addressed Description, Evaluation, and Action Plan. Guided reflection encouraged more balanced responses, including greater attention to Feelings, highlighting the value of explicit prompts in supporting emotional awareness. In the less-guided stage, student-generated questions led to broader engagement across the RLC stages. These findings suggest that structured scaffolding can help learners deepen their reflective practice and offer practical guidance for implementing reflection activities in language learning and other educational contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Reflection is increasingly recognized as essential in language learning for promoting metacognitive awareness, autonomy, and emotional engagement (Huang, 2021; Mynard, 2023). In practice, teachers tackle the question of how the process can effectively be scaffolded, as learners often struggle to engage in deep reflection on their learning, particularly without well-structured guidance or explicit training (Sampson, 2023). While various tools and frameworks have been developed to support reflection (e.g., Curry et al., 2023), learners' characteristics and tendencies in engaging with various components of the reflective process, as well as how different levels of guidance might shape their responses, have not been clearly understood.

The present study addresses this gap by exploring Japanese university students' reflections related to their self-directed learning. A reflection activity was conducted as part of a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) course where students learned from Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). These MOOCs, selected by students based on their own interests, served as rich, authentic content for both language learning and personal development. The diverse topics, self-paced structure, and inherent potential for learner autonomy within MOOCs offered an ideal foundation for students to reflect on their own learning. By discussing their MOOC experiences with peers, students were invited to articulate their learning trajectories, confront challenges, and consider emotional and cognitive aspects of their growth.

Using Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Learning Cycle (RLC), the study examined how different degrees of support shaped students' interaction with distinct elements of the reflective process under three conditions: non-guided reflection, guided reflection using teacher-developed prompts, and less-guided reflection using their own questions. Gibbs' model was selected for its clear and accessible structure as well as its emphasis on both emotional awareness and actionable outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reflection in language learning

In the field of language learning education, the concept of reflection has been studied extensively in the past years. Emphasizing learners' personal development, Mynard (2023) defines it as "the intentional examination of experiences, thoughts and actions to learn about oneself and inform change or personal growth" (pp. 23–24). Reflection fosters metacognitive awareness (Fleming, 2014; Huang, 2021), enabling learners to understand their processes, evaluate progress, and identify actions for positive outcomes. This metacognitive dimension highlights reflection's role in supporting self-directed and goal-oriented learning.

Beyond cognition, reflection also addresses affective dimensions of learning (Oxford, 2015). Emotional experiences in language learning, both positive and negative, play a significant role in shaping learners' motivation and outcomes (Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Schön, 1984). Yamashita (2015) describes learners' emotions as "an 'essential resource' that learners should make use of in helping learners become autonomous and achieve their learning goals in a self-fulfilling way" (p. 62). However, students often struggle to articulate these emotions, particularly in their target language (Dewaele, 2006). It is crucial to provide support in this area to foster their growth and autonomy (Yamashita, 2015).

While reflection is a critical component of successful learning, reflecting deeply and effectively seems to present challenges to many learners. The book, *Promoting Reflection on Language Learning: Lessons from a university setting* (edited by Curry et al., 2023), compiled detailed perspectives on reflection in a Japanese university context, the same setting as the present research. Three of the studies introduced there are particularly relevant to our study aims. Sampson's research analyzed the depth of reflections on speaking performance written by

50 Japanese students of English. Using Fleck and Fitzpatrick's (2010) scale, findings showed that most reflections remained heavily lacking significant analysis, and showed minimal change over two academic semesters. In another study, Ambinintsoa and MacDonald observed how students' depth of reflection may or may not change in one year. Although some reflections deepened over time, others became shallower or showed no change. This is in line with literature that suggests learners "do not necessarily linearly develop their reflective abilities" (p. 73). Drawing on students' feedback, the authors proposed several factors that may account for these differences, including individual interests, physical and emotional conditions, and perceived value of reflection. While these were most prominent in their data, other factors, such as task design or individual differences, may also affect reflective engagement. Finally, Stevenson and Bennett explored reflection in a CLIL course on MOOCs. They reported the value of structured reflective practices in MOOCs to enhance transformative learning, including reevaluating assumptions, gaining diverse perspectives, and fostering autonomy through tools such as reflective journals. These studies suggest that students need continuous support to reflect deeply and that developing reflective abilities takes a dynamic process.

Models of reflective learning

Research in language education suggests that regular engagement in reflection can support a range of learner outcomes. These may include increased self-awareness, more purposeful goal setting, greater recognition of personal learning strategies, enhanced metacognitive awareness, and improved problem-solving (e.g., Boud et al., 2013; Kato & Mynard, 2016). Reflection has also been associated with fostering learner autonomy and sustaining motivation, particularly when integrated as a structured part of the learning process.

Different models have been proposed to illustrate reflective learning, or "the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective" (Boyd & Fales, 1983, p. 99). Table 1 adapted from Mynard (2023), outlines key reflective models, offering a structured understanding of this transformative process.

Table 1

A summary of reflective models (Mynard, 2023, p. 28)

Model name	Developed by (year)	Components of the model
Model of Reflective Thought and Action	Dewey (1938)	Six: encountering a problem, intellectualizing and defining, studying conditions and forming a hypothesis, reasoning, hypothesis testing, and solving a problem/having an idea
Experimental Learning Model	Kolb (1984)	Four: concrete experience, reflexive observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation
Reflective Learning Cycle	Gibbs (1988)	Six: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan
Critical Reflectivity Model	Mezirow (1991)	Three: habitual action, thoughtful action, and introspection
Types of Reflection	Van Manen (1991)	Three: anticipatory, active/interactive, and recollective
The what? So what? Now what? Model	Driscoll (1994)	Three: what? so what? and now what?

Model name	Developed by (year)	Components of the model
Model for Reflection	Zeihner & Liston (1996)	Five: rapid action, repair, review, research, and reconstructing
Reviewing by Doing	Greenaway (1992)	Four: experience, express, examine, and explore
The 5R Framework	Bain et al. (2002)	Five: reporting, responding, relating, reasoning, and reconstructing
The Four F's of Active Reviewing	Greenaway (2002)	Four: facts, feelings, findings, and futures
Quality of Students' Reflections	Leijen et al. (2012)	Four: description, justification, critique, and discussion
The Integrated Reflective Cycle	Bassot (2013)	Four: experience, reflection on action, theory, and preparation
REFLECT Model	Taylor (2014)	Seven: readiness, exercising thoughts, following a systematic process, leaving oneself open to answers, enfolding insights, changing awareness, and tenacity in maintaining reflection
The CARL Framework	BlueSteps (2022)	Four: context, action, results, and learning

These models provide various ways to organize and encourage reflection in education, ranging from building practical skills and learning through experience to fostering deeper, critical, and transformative thinking.

Similarities between the models presented in Table 1 include that the process of reflection guides learners from experience to deeper understanding and learning (e.g., Driscoll, 1994; Greenaway, 1992; Kolb, 1984) and can be broken down into components such as feelings, evaluation, analysis, and planning for future actions (e.g., Bain et al., 2002; Gibbs, 1988). Furthermore, such models aim to foster deeper self-examination and critical reflection (including Mezirow, 1991, and Van Manen, 1991), and some include dialogue and feedback. Also, scholars designed models that encourage shifting from individual to collaborative, critical reflection (e.g., Taylor, 2014; Zeichner & Liston, 1996) and lead to improving future behaviors and learning strategies (in Driscoll, 1994; Gibbs, 1988; Mezirow, 1991).

The models of reflective learning presented in Table 1 are different in several ways. Regarding the depth, Bassot's model (2013) is cyclical, emphasizes iteration, and provides a structured, step-by-step approach. In contrast, Dewey (1938) focuses on continuous, active reflection without formal stages. Models by Mezirow (1991) and Taylor (2014) prioritize deeper, moral, or transformative inquiry, while Driscoll (1994) and Greenaway (1992) focus on practical improvements derived from experience. Furthermore, some models focus on critical reflection, which involves deeper analysis and questioning of assumptions to foster transformative learning (in Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 2014; Van Manen, 1991) and others on descriptive reflection which focuses on recounting experiences and identifying lessons learned without necessarily challenging underlying beliefs (e.g., Driscoll, 1994; Gibbs, 1988).

Gibbs' RLC (1988) was selected for this study because it offers a clear, structured framework that is particularly accessible to learners with varying levels of experience in reflective practice. Adapted from Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Model, Gibbs' RLC breaks the reflective process into six manageable stages (see Figure 1), making it easier for learners to engage systematically with their experiences. Its balanced emphasis on emotional awareness, helping learners consider how their feelings influence actions, and practical application of insights

align well with the study's goal of supporting learners in developing more intentional and sustained reflective habits.

Figure 1 Gibbs' RLC (1988, p. 49)

The first stage, *Description*, involves recounting what happened. The second stage, *Feelings*, focuses on the reactions and emotions experienced during the event. In the third stage, *Evaluation*, one judges the event as positive or negative. The fourth stage, *Analysis*, examines why things went well or not so well. Based on this analysis, at the fifth stage, *Conclusion*, one draws lessons from the experience. Finally, the last stage, *Action Plan*, involves planning how to act more effectively in the future. While each stage serves a distinct function, they are interconnected: earlier stages (e.g., *Description* and *Feelings*) facilitate deeper interpretation in *Analysis* and *Conclusion*, which in turn inform future actions (in *Action Plan*). Gibbs (1988) emphasizes the importance of helping learners clearly distinguish each stage in order to support more systematic and meaningful reflection. Our classroom reflection activity was based on this model as it offered appropriate scaffolding for our students. This activity was embedded in a CLIL course that used MOOCs as a learning resource, providing a flexible and autonomous learning context. The following section outlines key characteristics of MOOCs and examines their potential to support reflective engagement.

Massive open online courses

MOOCs are online courses offered mostly freely by institutions worldwide and delivered through platforms such as *Coursera*. They typically offer asynchronous learning content, including pre-recorded lectures and automated assessments, and limited instructor interaction (Bates, 2015). Initially aimed at widening access to education, MOOCs have become popular tools for self-directed learning. Covering a broad range of subjects, including academic disciplines (e.g., philosophy, law), languages (e.g., English, Korean), and business skills (e.g.,

negotiation, data analysis), MOOCs offer flexibility and opportunities to facilitate learner autonomy.

Learning with MOOCs can present various challenges such as difficulty understanding content, limited instructional support, time and workload management, lack of external accountability, and a reduced sense of community (Hew & Cheung, 2014; Zheng et al., 2015). These difficulties necessitate effective reflection on emotions, strategies, and beliefs, which could be facilitated by structured guidance (Stevenson & Bennett, 2023). Additionally, the openness and diversity of MOOC content offer opportunities for transformative learning. Learners may be exposed to unfamiliar cultural, ideological, or disciplinary viewpoints, encouraging critical reflection and perspective-taking (Ferguson & Sharples, 2014). When paired with peer discussion, MOOCs can create a space for dialogic reflection in which learners evaluate their assumptions, articulate insights, and consider future applications of their (self-directed) learning (e.g., Araneta et al., 2024; Bennett, 2023; Bennett & Ubukata, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This study examines how Japanese university students engage in written reflection during a CLIL course based on the MOOC content they individually learned. Building on research that highlights challenges in fostering deep reflection and its non-linear development, the study explores how varying degrees of scaffolding influence students' use of reflective elements. Those reflections were elicited in three different stages during their seven-week MOOC learning: (1) non-guided reflection, (2) guided reflection with questions developed by the researchers, and (3) less-guided reflection with students' own questions. To address gaps, by taking an exploratory approach, in understanding how learners engage with and internalize reflection across different levels of support, we ask the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: Which aspect(s) of Gibbs' RLC emerge in an initial non-guided reflection?
RQ2: Which aspect(s) of Gibbs' RLC emerge in the guided reflections?
RQ3: Which aspect(s) of Gibbs' RLC emerge in students' own reflective questions and answers after the guided reflections?

Based on findings from each stage of reflection, we identify overarching trends and patterns in the conclusion section.

Context

The study took place at a small private Japanese university specializing in languages and cultures. Both researchers work as learning advisors at a self-access learning center at the institution where various resources and services are provided for students to engage in language learning activities.

In terms of courses, the university offers CLIL classes to third- and fourth-year students to enhance their academic, language, and cognitive skills. The research was carried out in a course taught by the authors, where students engaged in online learning using MOOC platforms

(*Future Learn*, *Coursera*, and *EdX*), aligning with experiential learning principles by enabling personal connection to content and reflection on real-world topics. Our CLIL course aims to support students in developing the skills necessary to effectively guide their independent learning through individual and collaborative work, and effectively guide their independent learning while learning English, their target language. The first six weeks prepare students for autonomous online study, covering skills for effective autonomous learning, including note-taking, reporting, and asking reflective questions. The rest of the semester consists of individual MOOC learning.

Participants

This study involved seven students from a 15-week elective CLIL course with a total enrollment of 24. Their English proficiency level was high-intermediate, and none had prior experience learning through MOOCs. These participants were selected based on their completion of all reflection tasks and their consent to the use of their work. Pseudonyms are used to protect anonymity. While the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings, the data offer initial insights into patterns related to the three research questions and help illustrate how learners engaged with Gibbs' RLC across different stages of the activity.

Ethical considerations and instrument

Ethical clearance was granted by the university Ethics Committee, and informed consent was obtained. As the researchers were also the course instructors, we acknowledged that our dual roles may have influenced students' responses, potentially fostering openness through established rapport but also posing a risk of social desirability bias. To address this, we emphasized the distinction between teaching and research roles, clarified that participation would not affect grades, and ensured that reflections were not assessed for content. Ongoing reflexive dialogue between researchers supported critical awareness of our positionality throughout the study.

In the second half of the semester, students completed a weekly reflective learning journal to record experiences, thoughts, and feelings throughout their independent MOOC learning. Following the weekly journal submission, students participated in a peer discussion (PD), where they shared their learning experiences. Each of the seven PDs corresponded to one week of MOOC learning. Before each discussion, participants received a worksheet (See Appendices A to C) designed by the researchers based on Gibbs' RLC (1988). To ensure a shared understanding of the task, we explained the purpose of each activity in class, modeled example responses, and confirmed comprehension by inviting questions. Students also worked collaboratively, which allowed for peer clarification and support. The following describes how the activity was conducted.

1. Step 1 (20 minutes): Students discussed what they had learned, how they learned it, and how they felt about their MOOC experience.
2. Step 2 (10–15 minutes): Students wrote an individual reflection based on the PD. The reflection format changed across the seven weeks:
   - Week 1: Non-guided reflection (See Appendix A)
   - Week 2 to 5: Guided reflection with five questions created by the researchers based on Gibbs' RLC (1988; see Figure 1 for the original and Appendix B for an example worksheet)

- Weeks 6 and 7: Less-guided reflection with students' own reflective questions (See Appendix C).

We designed three different formats for Step 2. Week 1 captured learners' spontaneous reflections. Weeks 2–5 used structured prompts aligned with Gibbs' RLC as scaffolding to facilitate students' reflection. In Weeks 6–7, students created their own reflective questions within the same format, allowing us to observe how earlier scaffolding may have supported their development of independent reflective practices. While the instructions supported consistent task interpretation, we remained mindful of their potential influence when analyzing students' reflections.

To facilitate students' reflection on Feelings, in the second stage of Gibbs' RLC, we asked: *How did you feel about sharing your learning and/or listening to your classmates' learning? Insert an emoji and explain why*. Emojis are common visual symbols in network communication (Bai et al., 2019) and have become an indispensable part of written interactions on various online platforms (Li & Yang, 2018). Considering that our students grew up with constant access to digital resources, including social media, we decided to add emojis to make reflection more accessible. However, we did not analyze the specific emotions conveyed by the emoji, as interpretations can vary considerably depending on context, and such analysis was beyond the methodological scope of this study (Jaeger et al., 2019; Tigwell & Flatla, 2016).

Data analysis

We collected 49 written reflections from the seven participants across three stages of the project: seven non-guided reflections (Week 1), 28 guided reflections (Weeks 2–5), and 14 student-generated reflections (Weeks 6–7). The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), structured around Gibbs' RLC: *Description*, *Feelings*, *Evaluation*, *Analysis*, *Conclusion*, and *Action Plan*.

Our analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework:

1. Familiarization: read all entries multiple times to become immersed in the data.
2. Initial coding: independently apply deductive codes to each sentence or segment of student reflections and questions, mapping them to the six stages of Gibbs' RLC.
3. Searching for patterns: identify the number and variety of RLC elements that appeared across individual reflections and across time.
4. Reviewing themes: compare coding decisions, discuss discrepancies, and refine our understanding of how each RLC element was expressed by students.
5. Defining and naming themes: select representative quotes and coded excerpts to illustrate how students expressed each RLC element.
6. Producing the report: summarize the coding results and use descriptive statistics (Loeb et al., 2017) to highlight the distribution of RLC elements across the data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1: Which aspect(s) of Gibbs' RLC emerge in an initial non-guided reflection?

After the first week of MOOC learning, participants orally shared their experiences in peer discussions before writing a non-guided reflection based on a simple prompt (see Appendix A). These initial reflections ranged from 64 to 179 words, addressing one to five aspects of Gibbs' RLC (see Table 2). Specifically, six participants included *Description*, five *Evaluation* and *Action Plan*, three *Conclusion*, two *Feelings*, and one *Analysis*. More specifically, the coding indicates that 85% focused on *Description*, 71% on *Evaluation* and on *Action Plan*, 42% on *Conclusion,* 28% on *Feelings*, and 14% on *Analysis*. This suggests that they largely focused on summarizing the discussion, assessing their knowledge-sharing skills, and planning improvements for future PD and MOOC learning, with less attention given to their emotional experiences during the process, how the discussion applied to their own learning process, and what they learned from others.

Table 2

Aspects of Gibbs' RLC emerged in week 1 students' reflection

	Description (D)	Feeling (F)	Evaluation (E)	Analysis (A)	Conclusion (C)	Action Plan (AP)
Ryota	■		■	■		■
Miki	■					
Honoka	■	■	■		■	
Kazuki			■			■
Suzu	■	■	■		■	■
Tomoka	■		■		■	■
Ayano	■					■

Suzu's non-guided reflection covers most aspects of Gibbs' RLC and provides representative examples of such aspects. Table 3 presents quotes from her reflection, coded according to the model.

Table 3

Suzu's week 1 reflection

Line	Quote	Coding
1	From a peer share on what we learned last week, I could get ideas that I haven't come up with	D
2	and I think it would be helpful for next learning.	C
3	All I talked to was focusing on time management in 1st week, so we mainly discussed it.	D
4	And one took 2 different styles for note-taking because she wanted to compare which styles would be preferred to take notes effectively for her.	D
5	Then I thought it was interesting because I just take notes really simply, but my understanding of the learning and motivation would be increased if I could do it more effectively.	F
6	I think I should use some different styles of note-taking and compare them to find one suitable for me.	C
7	Also, I struggled with many terminologies in my course, so I took longer to understand the contents clearly.	E
8	Then, my partners suggested that I read articles at first, before jumping into video materials or searching synonyms on the Internet.	D
9	I guess both of their ideas would be working well for me, and I would like to take them into my next learning.	AP

Her reflection shows that the in-class discussion helped her reflect on most aspects of Gibbs' RLC. She described the discussion in detail (lines 1, 3, 4, and 8), reflected on her emotional response (line 5) and others' reactions (line 4), assessed the effectiveness of peer discussions (line 7), and drew conclusions from the PD (lines 2 and 6) about improving her upcoming MOOC study by identifying ideas to incorporate in her learning process (line 9).

The results collected from reflection through a non-guided written activity indicate that students included one to five aspects of Gibbs' RLC. Findings also suggest that formal guidance on using all aspects of Gibbs' RLC could enhance students' reflective skills, particularly in addressing emotions and applying lessons learned during the PDs. This finding reflects prior research showing that, without explicit scaffolding, learners often struggle to engage in deeper or more abstract aspects of reflection (Allas et al., 2016; Toom et al., 2015). While emotional and analytical components are essential to meaningful reflection (Yamashita, 2015), students may lack awareness of their value or may not intuitively consider them part of reflection. Furthermore, considering students' demonstrated language ability, this limited attention to emotional content in Week 1 is likely due to a lack of awareness rather than linguistic difficulty, echoing Dewaele's (2006) observation that expressing emotion in a second language is complex but not necessarily inaccessible.

RQ2: Which aspect(s) of Gibbs' RLC emerge in the guided reflections?

From Weeks 2 to 5, students reflected on their PD sessions using five guiding questions based on Gibbs' RLC (see Appendix B for the worksheet). This section shows the results of our analysis on the aspects addressed for each question.

The first guiding question at this stage was *How did you feel about sharing your learning and/or listening to your classmates' learning? Insert an emoji and explain why*. Figure 2 shows which aspects of Gibbs' RLC emerged in how many students, as elicited by this question. The vertical axis represents the number of students, while the horizontal axis indicates the aspects included in their reflections. The gray rectangle highlights the target aspect prompted by the question.

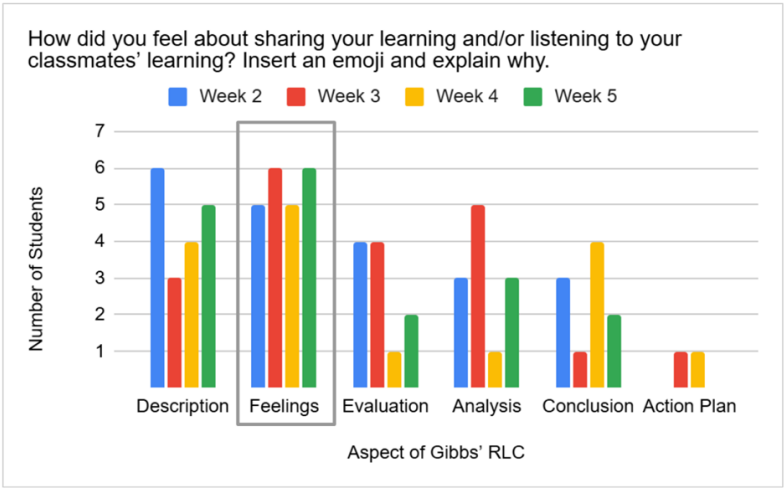

Figure 2 Aspects of Gibbs' RLC emerged in students' responses to the first guiding question

This reflective question was provided to encourage students to reflect on their feelings. Five students in Week 2, six in Week 3, five in Week 4, and six in Week 5 described their feelings in their entries (22 in total). For example, "I felt impressed while listening to my classmates' learning." (Miki, Week 3) or "I enjoyed sharing and listening to my partner's experience." (Suzu, Week 4). While most students described their feelings in response to the guiding question, some students also provided Description (18 in total, from Week 2 to 5), *Evaluation* (11), *Analysis* (12), and *Conclusion* (10), as well as *Action Plan* (two), although to a lesser extent.

Table 4 presents an example of Week 2 guided reflection, Honoka's. Her answer provides an illustrative example of how some students expanded their reflection beyond the targeted aspect of Gibbs' RLC.

Table 4

Honoka's week 2 individual written reflection

Line	Quote	Coding
1	Compared to last week, I could explain well enough this time but gradually I was not sure what I wanted to say.	E
3	I think it means that I can't understand perfectly.	A
4	I was discouraged by myself.	F
5	If I change point of view, it helps me improve my way of studying.	C
6	Also, while learning about my peer reflection, I realized my peers are interested in laws, especially the light of women. The contents are very difficult, but they were enjoying the course. (My opinion)	D

The second guiding question in the written reflection (Week 2 through 5) was *What was positive about sharing your learning and/or listening to your classmates' learning? What was negative?* The question targeted *Evaluation*, the third stage of Gibbs' RLC (see Gibbs' initial question in Figure 1). Our initial expectation was that the question would also lead students to include their rationale, that is, *Analysis*, without an explicit prompt. As shown in Figure 3, *Evaluation* was what the students expressed the most, with four students in Week 2, five in Week 3, six in Week 4, and five in Week 5 (20 in total).

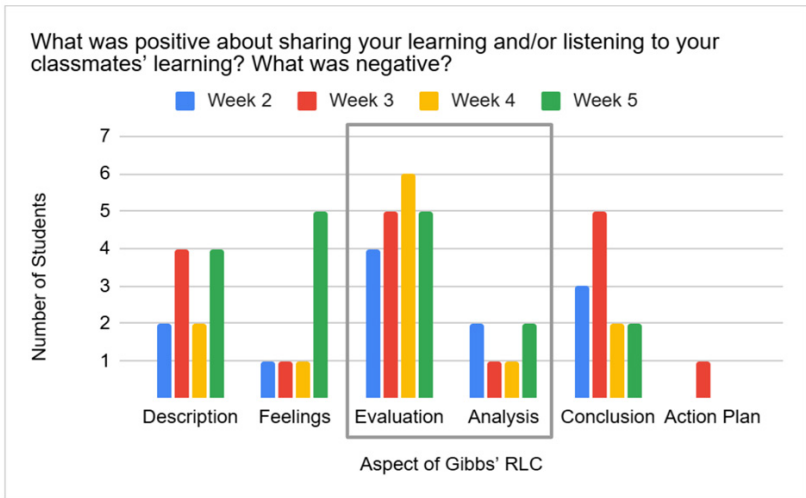

Figure 3 Aspects of Gibbs' RLC emerged in students' responses to the second guiding question

On the other hand, fewer students addressed *Analysis* (two in Week 2, one in Week 3 and 4, and two in Week 5; six in total). When students evaluated their performances in their PD session, some expressed certain points as positive or negative and yet did not go beyond to give a rationale. For example, Tomoka's reflection (Week 2): "I can remember the topic of my learning and review my learning again. It is a positive thing. A negative thing is losing confidence because I compare my learning and their learning." It should also be noted that, similarly to the first guiding question, the other stages of Gibbs' RLC were observed: *Description* (12 in total), *Feelings* (eight), *Conclusion* (12), and *Action Plan* (one). This result suggests that the guiding question effectively prompted one targeted aspect (*Evaluation*) but did not confine reflection to it.

The third guiding question, *What impact does today's peer share have on your learning process?*, was provided to scaffold students to draw conclusions from their PD. Figure 4 shows their responses.

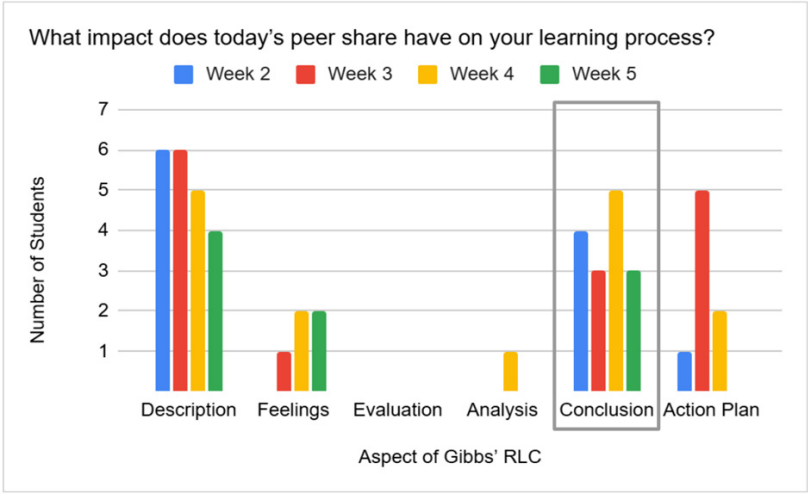

Figure 4 Aspects of Gibbs' RLC emerged in students' responses to the third guiding question

The reflections of four students in Week 2, three in Week 3, five in Week 4, and three in Week 5 (15 in total), included *Conclusion. Description* (21 in total), *Feelings* (five in total), *Analysis* (one), and *Action Plan* (eight) were also observed. For example, Honoka wrote "My peers showed me a chart that made it easy to understand the relationship between action and emotion. I realized that it's okay to rely on internet information if I can't explain it easily." (Week 5). She first explained what her peers did (*Description*), and then summarized her realization about the use of resources to support herself (*Conclusion*).

The fourth guiding questions asked students What else they could have shared? *What else could you have asked?*, prompting *Description* and *Conclusion*. Students' reflections were coded as *Description* when listing additional discussion points, while they were coded as *Conclusion* when drawing more general conclusions. Figure 5 summarizes the results.

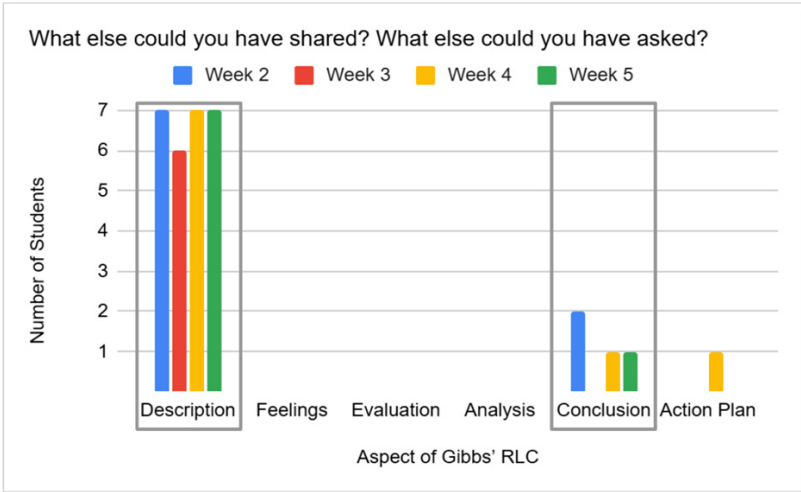

Figure 5 Aspects of Gibbs' RLC emerged in students' responses to the fourth guiding question

When we first used the guiding questions in Week 2, we observed that several students did not understand this question in English. For example, instead of writing what they could have done differently, they described what they did in the discussion with their peers: "I shared about my learning. This time, I learned about #Me Too Movement deeply, I can communicate with my classmates using this topic" (Kazuki, Week 2). Thus, we explained the question to the class and added a Japanese translation to the question in the worksheet. Others, however, responded to the guiding questions by listing the ideas that they thought they could have done to improve their session, such as "I wanted to explain my MOOC contents more. I couldn't explain some information because it looked really hard to explain and it will take time." (Suzu, Week 4) and "I wanted to share and ask the feeling more, especially the negative one because I had negative feelings last week so I wanted to ask that you have been negative while learning." (Ayano, Week 5). There were a few students who made general conclusions (two in Week 2, one in Weeks 3 and 4) such as: "By reflecting this [PD], I thought it was better to share my strategy in order to get some advice from my pairs." (Miki, Week 4)

The fifth guiding question, targeting *Action Plan, was: You will share your learning with 2 classmates again next week. Would you change the way you share or listen to your classmates? If so, why and how? If not, why not?* This question generated action plans for more than half of the students in each week (seven students in Week 2 and five in Week 3 to 5), as shown in Figure 6.

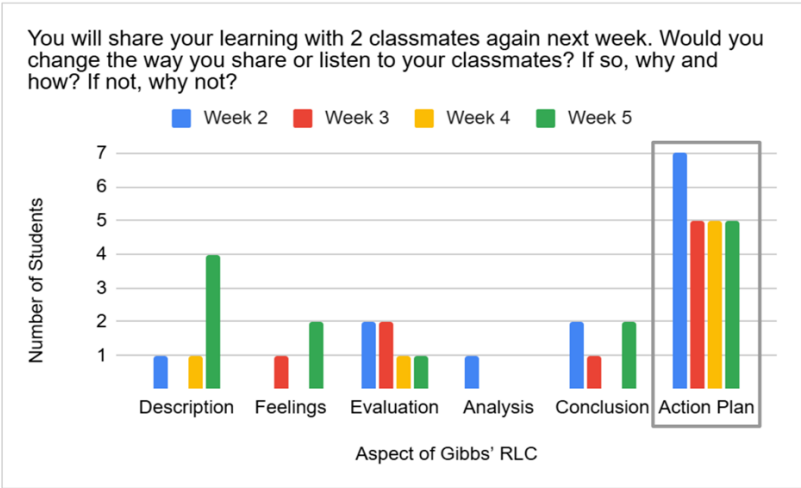

Figure 6 Aspects of Gibbs' RLC emerged in students' responses to the fifth guiding question

Students commented on various ideas such as changing the way they explain their ideas or respond to others. For example, "I want to change next time I want to explain using easy words. And I would like to comment more for classmates." (Tomoka, Week 3). Other students' responses also included *Description* (six in total), *Feelings* (three), *Evaluation* (six), *Analysis* (one), and *Conclusion* (five).

Findings from these students' reflections suggest that the PD format seemed to prompt them to incorporate multiple perspectives, which in turn enriched their individual reflections. These findings support the inclusion of peer dialogue as a valuable reflective scaffold, one that not only provides ideas and vocabulary but also fosters emotional and cognitive engagement. Additionally, the guiding questions generally elicited responses for each aspect of Gibbs' RLC effectively, without limiting their reflection to the targeted aspects. In fact, many students expanded their reflections to include additional aspects, building upon the targeted area. This expansion suggests that guiding questions were not perceived as limiting but rather served as a springboard for more comprehensive reflection. Such findings align with Allas et al. (2016), who emphasize the role of structured prompts in facilitating focused yet expansive reflective thinking, and with Ryan (2013), who argues that reflection is not inherently intuitive and requires intentional support. The increase in reflective depth also aligns with Zeichner and Liston's (1996) idea that collaborative and dialogic practices foster deeper understanding.

RQ3: Which aspect(s) of Gibbs' RLC emerge in students' own reflective questions and answers after the guided reflections?

During Weeks 6 and 7 of the PDs, after orally sharing their learning experiences and methods with their classmates, participants were required to create and answer three to five self-reflective questions themselves (see Appendix C).

Students' questions

The analysis of the way students formulated their questions suggested they focused on different stages of Gibbs' RLC. Table 5 shows the number of questions corresponding to each stage for Week 6 and 7.

Table 5

Students' questions in week 6 and 7 coded

Codes (Aspects of Gibbs' RLC)	Week 6	Week 7	Total of codes for each aspect
Description (D)	9	9	18
Feeling (F)	2	5	7
Evaluation (E)	7	10	17
Analysis (A)	1	2	3
Conclusion (C)	3	1	4
Action Plan (AP)	3	1	4
No Code (NC)	5	2	7

As Table 5 shows, in Week 6 and 7, students' questions mainly focused on describing what happened during their MOOC self-study "Sometimes, we couldn't manage our time with additional work. How did you remanage in order to achieve all of your MOOCs?" (Miki), and the structure of the last PD, for example: "Did you have enough time to share your contents?" (Ryota) or "Did you improve your sharing skills compared to before?" (Tomoka). The second most frequent focus was on evaluating their learning process, "Which kind of MOOC type (video, article, other resources, etc.) was the best way to understand about your MOOC?" (Miki), and/or their ability to share information successfully during the PD, "Did you feel this peer share is effective or not? Why or why not?" (Suzu). Furthermore, the third aspect that emerged focused on the participants' *Feelings* about their PD experience and/or MOOC process, such as "How did it feel to talk with partners?" (Kazuki).

Student questions from Week 6 and 7 indicate a prioritization of *Description*, *Evaluation*, and *Feelings*. This highlights the relevance of these aspects in their learning process and suggests that students are reflecting more objectively on their own learning (in MOOCs and PDs) and the learning of others, leading to more conscious decision-making.

Students' answers

After writing their questions, students individually answered those in writing. The analysis of their answer shows three tendencies, which are visible in Table 6 and 7 below: a) students' answers matched the aspect of Gibbs' RLC implied in their questions (yellow in the tables), b) students' answers matched and expanded the aspect of Gibbs' RLC implied in their questions (blue in the tables), and c) students' answers did not match the aspect of Gibbs' RLC implied in their questions (red in the tables). Q corresponds to the number of the question (e.g., Q1 for Question 1) and A the number of the answer (e.g., A1 for Answer 1). The tables also include some non-coded answers (NC) since they were not focusing on any aspects of MOOC learning or Gibbs' RLC.

Table 6

Aspects of Gibbs' RLC in students' answers (week 6)

	Q1	A1	Q2	A2	Q3	A3	Q4	A4	Q5	A5
Ryota	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC
Miki	E	E/A	D	D/E/A	F	F/E	E	E/A	E	E/A
Honoka	E	C	D	D/A	D	F/D				
Kazuki	D	D	C	C	AP	D/C				
Suzu	D	D/E/A	D	D	C	C/F	E/A	E/A/C		
Tomoka	E	E	E	E	F	F/D	AP	E/AP	AP	AP
Ayano	D	D	D	D/E/A	C	C	D	D/C		

In Week 6, almost half of the students' answers matched and expanded the aspect of Gibbs' RLC implied in their questions (48.3% or 14 answers), more than a quarter of their answers matched the aspect of Gibbs' RLC implied in their questions (27.5% or 8 responses), and 6.9% (or 2 answers) of their answers mismatched the aspect of Gibbs' RLC suggested in their questions.

Furthermore, 11 answers corresponded to *Evaluation* of their learning process and the PD, for example, "Personally, this peer share is totally effective to improve my summarizing, listening and conversation skills" (Suzu). Ten answers focused on *Description*, as in "Both she and I struggled to fix time for doing MOOC when we had extra tasks to do as the semester is ending" (Ayano). Eight answers indicate *Analysis* of what and how they learned, as well as what and how the PD was conducted, including Honoka's reflection: "I always show some pictures or give some examples. It's because it is easy to understand at glance."

Table 7

Aspects of Gibbs' RLC in students' answers (week 7)

	Q1	A1	Q2	A2	Q3	A3	Q4	A4	Q5	A5
Ryota	NC	NC	D	E	E	E/D	D	D	NC	NC
Miki	D	D	F	F/A	E/A	E/A	E	E/A	E/A	E/A
Honoka	D	D	D	D/A	D	D/E				
Kazuki	AP	D/E	F	AP	E	AP				
Suzu	D/E	D/E/C	F	F/D	E/D	D/E/A				
Tomoka	E	E	F	F/E	E	E	E	E/D/A		
Ayano	F	E/A	C	C	D	D	AP	AP		

In Week 7, 38.5% (or ten responses) of students' answers corresponded to the aspect of Gibbs' RLC implied in their questions (shown in yellow). An equal percentage represents the answers that matched and expanded the aspect of Gibbs' RLC implied in their questions (in blue), and 19.2% of their answers did not match the aspect of Gibbs' RLC suggested in their questions (in red).

Additionally, 14 of the participants' answers, such as "The memorable thing was my pair changed a topic last time, and he read long sentences to learn. I don't like to read so I thought I couldn't read what he read" (Tomoka), indicated that they focused on evaluating the last PD and their MOOC learning process. Also, 12 answers describe the discussion and the autonomous learning, including (Tomoka) "First time I couldn't explain to classmates who didn't know the

contents of my learning. However I changed professional words to easy words to understand easily", and eight answers suggest participants analyzed how they learned as well as what and how the PD was conducted, in Suzu's answer, for example: "When I have something I can't get, I always try to ask or do a quick review of what they say together to make a clear understanding when discussing."

The analysis evidenced that participants' questions and answers, from Weeks 6 and 7, mainly focused on four aspects of Gibbs' RLC: *Description*, *Feelings*, *Evaluation*, and *Analysis*. It suggests, to a certain degree, an improvement in their ability to formulate and answer their own questions, compare to Week 1. Furthermore, responses aligning with aspects of Gibbs' RLC increased, while those expanding on Gibbs' RLC decreased. However, Week 7 saw a rise in answers mismatching the suggested aspect of Gibbs' RLC, instead focusing on their learning process and final exam. Questions also demonstrated a more objective consideration of MOOC learning, in-class discussions, and classmates' experiences to make conscious decisions. Furthermore, students not only matched the RLC aspect implied in their questions but often expanded their responses beyond what was asked. For instance, a question initially targeting *Evaluation* sometimes prompted an answer that included *Analysis* or a specific *Action Plan*. This tendency to build on reflection aligns with the iterative nature of reflective practice described by Bassot (2013), in which learners cycle through reflection stages and deepen understanding over time.

Notably, reflections in this phase became more metacognitive and strategic. Some students, for example, indicated a shift in how they approached peer discussions or used MOOC materials based on insights gained from earlier weeks. These findings suggest that with repeated, scaffolded opportunities, learners can begin to reflect more independently and critically. Peer discussions continued to provide a meaningful context for these reflections, reinforcing the value of collaborative reflection spaces highlighted in Taylor's REFLECT framework (2014).

CONCLUSION

The study found that in the initial reflection phase, students focused on *Description* and *Evaluation* aspects of Gibbs' RLC, with limited attention to *Feelings* or *Analysis*. Guided prompts in the second phase elicited more comprehensive reflections, particularly on *Feelings* and *Analysis*, indicating the value of scaffolding. Students' reflections generally aligned with the targeted aspects and some extended into others. By the final phase, participants showed further ability to connect past and current learning, reflecting more comprehensively and collaboratively. However, certain aspects, such as *Analysis*, remained underexplored, suggesting the need for more explicit prompts to encourage discussion.

While the findings provide insights into Japanese learners' engagement with reflection, this study has certain limitations. Using additional data collection methods, such as interviews or classroom observations, might have offered a more detailed understanding of how learners experienced the guided reflection process. Additionally, the focus on a specific participant group in a particular setting limits generalizability.

To conclude, this research suggests that incorporating regular reflective activities into language courses, through explicit prompts and peer dialogue, can support metacognitive growth and learner autonomy. Building on previous studies (e.g., Bennett & Yarwood, 2020; Pemberton & Mynard, 2023) and our own results, structured classroom tasks that gradually evolve in complexity may help students develop the awareness needed to sustain reflection independently. Activities that involve formulating their own reflective questions may effectively lead learners to examine aspects of learning that would remain unexplored otherwise. Furthermore, providing multiple modes of reflection (e.g., writing, drawing, discussion) can also accommodate diverse learner preferences and language abilities. Most importantly, regular practice, underpinned by reflective tools and classroom integration, appears essential for helping students internalize these skills as part of their learning process.

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Appendix A
Week 1: Reflection Worksheet

Week 1: Reflection Worksheet

Step 1: Share the following with your classmates:

- **What you learned** (= MOOC content)
  - What did you learn in your MOOC this week?
  - How is the MOOC content related to yourself?
- **How you learned/studied** (e.g. resources, strategies, anything you kept in mind while doing your MOOC)
  - What did you do in order to make your learning effective?
  - What made your learning effective (or not so effective)?
- **How you feel** about your MOOC learning

*Give as many details as possible (what did you learn? When? How was it?).
*Ask questions to your classmates! (e.g. How did you…? What was your…?)

Step 2: Write a reflection on your peer share:

Appendix B
Week 2: Reflection Worksheet

Week 2: Reflection Worksheet

Step 1: Share the following with your classmates:

- **What you learned** (= MOOC content)
  - What did you learn in your MOOC this week?
  - How is the MOOC content related to yourself?
- **How you learned/studied** (e.g. resources, strategies, anything you kept in mind while doing your MOOC)
  - What did you do in order to make your learning effective?
  - What made your learning effective (or not so effective)?
- **How you feel** about your MOOC learning

*Give as many details as possible (what did you learn? When? How was it?).
*Ask questions to your classmates! (e.g. How did you…? What was your…?)

Step 2: Write a reflection answering the following questions:

1. **How did you feel** about sharing your learning and/or listening to your classmates' learning? Insert an emoji and explain why.

2. What was **positive** about sharing your learning and/or listening to your classmates' learning? What was **negative**?

3. **What impact** does today's peer share have on your learning process?

4. What else could you have shared? What else could you have asked?

5. You will share your learning with 2 classmates again next week. Would you change the way you share or listen to your classmates? If so, why and how? If not, why not?

Appendix C
Week 6: Reflection Worksheet

Week 6: Reflection Worksheet

Step 1: Share the following with your classmates:

- **What you learned** (= MOOC content)
  - What did you learn in your MOOC this week?
  - How is the MOOC content related to yourself?
- **How you learned/studied** (e.g. resources, strategies, anything you kept in mind while doing your MOOC)
  - What did you do in order to make your learning effective?
  - What made your learning effective (or not so effective)?
- **How you feel** about your MOOC learning

*Give as many details as possible (what did you learn? When? How was it?).
*Ask questions to your classmates! (e.g. How did you…? What was your…?)

Step 2: Write 3 to 5 reflective questions for yourself about the peer share and answer those questions.

Reflective Question 1:

Write a reflection to answer your question:

Reflective Question 2:

Write a reflection to answer your question:

Reflective Question 3:

Write a reflection to answer your question:

Reflective Question 4:

Write a reflection to answer your question:

Reflective Question 5:

Write a reflection to answer your question: