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Reflective thinking in the ESL classroom

Роль рефлексивного мислення у вивченні англійської як другої іноземної мови

Summary. *The article is focused on the analysis of reflective thinking and why it should be applied in the ESL classroom. Reflective thinking plays a crucial role in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom, facilitating both teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. It encourages teachers to critically analyze their instructional strategies, classroom interactions, and students' progress to make informed decisions for improvement. Reflective thinking fosters metacognitive awareness, enabling ESL learners to evaluate their language learning processes, identify challenges, and develop effective strategies to enhance their proficiency.*

One of the key aspects of reflective thinking in the ESL classroom is self-assessment. Teachers who engage in reflective practice continuously assess their lesson plans, teaching methodologies, and student engagement. They may use journals, peer observations, or video recordings of their lessons to analyze their teaching practices. This process allows them to recognize areas for growth and adapt their approaches to meet the diverse needs of students. Similarly, students benefit from self-reflection by identifying strengths and weaknesses in their language skills. By keeping learning journals or participating in guided discussions about their progress, they become more aware of their learning styles and develop self-regulated learning habits.

Another important element is feedback and dialogue. Encouraging students to engage in reflective discussions about their learning experiences enhances their ability to articulate thoughts in English while refining their critical thinking skills. Teachers can integrate reflection through structured activities such as think-pair-share exercises, peer reviews, and class discussions. These activities provide students with opportunities to analyze their learning progress, set goals, and explore new ways of improving their language skills.

Furthermore, reflective thinking in the ESL classroom supports a growth mindset, promoting resilience and motivation among learners. When students reflect on their experiences, they recognize the value of persistence and effort in language acquisition. Teachers can foster this mindset by modeling reflective

behavior, sharing personal learning experiences, and encouraging students to view mistakes as opportunities for growth rather than failures.

Incorporating reflective thinking into the ESL classroom benefits both teachers and students, leading to a more dynamic, student-centered learning environment. By cultivating self-awareness, critical analysis, and continuous improvement, reflection enhances the overall effectiveness of language education and prepares students for lifelong learning.

Key words: *reflective thinking, thinking process, critical thinking, analyzing, English as a second language, classroom, teacher, student.*

Анотація. *Статтю присвячено аналізу рефлексивного мислення та чому варто застосовувати цей інструмент при вивченні англійської, як другої іноземної мови. Рефлексивне мислення відіграє ключову роль при вивченні англійської, як другої іноземної мови (ESL), сприяючи як ефективності викладання, так і результатам навчання студентів. Воно заохочує вчителів критично аналізувати свої методи викладання, взаємодію в класі та прогрес учнів, щоб ухвалювати обґрунтовані рішення для покращення. Для учнів які вивчають англійську, як другу іноземну мову (ESL) рефлексивне мислення сприяє розвитку метакогнітивної обізнаності, допомагаючи їм оцінювати процеси вивчення мови, визначати труднощі та розробляти ефективні стратегії для підвищення своєї компетентності.*

Одним із ключових аспектів рефлексивного мислення у вивченні англійської, як другої іноземної мови (ESL) є самооцінка. Вчителі, які займаються рефлексивною практикою, постійно оцінюють свої плани уроків, методи викладання та рівень залученості студентів. Вони можуть використовувати журнали, спостереження колег або відеозаписи своїх занять для аналізу власної викладацької практики. Цей процес дозволяє їм виявляти сфери для розвитку та адаптувати свої підходи відповідно до різноманітних потреб студентів. Аналогічно, студенти отримують користь від самоаналізу, визначаючи свої сильні та слабкі сторони у вивченні мови. Ведення навчальних журналів або участь у керованих обговореннях щодо їхнього прогресу допомагає їм краще усвідомлювати власний стиль навчання та розвивати навички саморегульованого навчання.

Ще одним важливим елементом є зворотний зв'язок і діалог. Заохочення студентів до рефлексивних обговорень про їхній досвід навчання підвищує їхню здатність формулювати думки англійською мовою, одночасно розвиваючи критичне мислення. Вчителі можуть інтегрувати рефлексію через структуровані завдання, такі як вправи «подумай-поділись-обговори», взаємні рецензії та класові дискусії. Ці заходи надають студентам можливість аналізувати свій навчальний прогрес, ставити цілі та знаходити нові способи вдосконалення мовних навичок.

Крім того, рефлексивне мислення у вивченні англійської, як другої іноземної мови (ESL) підтримує мислення орієнтоване на зростання, сприяючи стійкості та мотивації серед учнів. Коли студенти аналізують свій досвід, вони усвідомлюють цінність наполегливості та зусиль у вивченні мови. Вчителі можуть сприяти формуванню такого мислення, демонструючи рефлексивну поведінку, ділячись власним навчальним досвідом і заохочуючи студентів сприймати помилки як можливості для розвитку, а не як невдачі.

Інтеграція рефлексивного мислення у вивченні англійської, як другої іноземної мови (ESL) приносить користь як вчителям, так і студентам, створюючи більш динамічне та орієнтоване на учнів навчальне середовище. Розвиток самоусвідомлення, критичного аналізу та прагнення до безперервного вдосконалення підвищує загальну ефективність мовної освіти та готує студентів до навчання протягом усього життя.

Ключові слова: рефлексивне мислення, процес мислення, критичне мислення, аналіз, англійська як друга мова, класна кімната, вчитель, студент.

Introduction. Reflective thinking is a part of the thinking process that focuses on analyzing and drawing conclusions regarding past actions.

In a teaching context, reflective thinking refers to encouraging students always to reflect upon the information they have and what they still need to obtain and helping them find ways to reduce that gap throughout the learning process constantly.

The need to reflect is considered to be a part of our nature and the premises to reflective thinking are intertwined with our reality, which can be interpreted in the following ways:

- Students are naturally curious;
- Teachers need to find a way to keep curiosity in learning without squashing it and killing students' creativity;
- Teachers need to nurture this curiosity to go not only at the beginning of an activity but at the end as well. It's important to allow our students to go beyond in order to activate their critical thinking and, thus, ability to self-reflect.

What is more, it is difficult to understate the importance of reflective practice for learning. Dewey states that «We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience» [1], which means that the experience alone does not necessarily lead to learning; it is the reflection that makes sense of the experience to us and hence makes the experience meaningful for us.

We must say, that the importance of reflection in ESL classrooms is quite obvious. There are some proofs:

- It builds more resilient students.

When the students are able to reflect, they can go beyond and improve their weak spots. Sometimes, our students hit the wall, and they can't move on. But when they are able to reflect, they can analyze what's wrong and why they can't do this or that. Once they realize that things aren't working, they can find solutions and depend less on use. Thus, reflection allows students to be less dependent on teachers.

- It helps students to display their grit – passion, and perseverance for long-term goals.

When you can reflect on what you're doing, it means you can think of how you can do it this way or the other way in the long term. The ongoing reflection makes us long-term learners.

- It helps them become autonomous learners and take full responsibility for their learning.

The **subject matter** of the study in reflective thinking refers to the processes, strategies, and impacts of self-analysis and critical evaluation in learning and teaching. It explores how teachers and students engage in reflection to enhance language acquisition, improve instructional methods, and foster a deeper understanding of learning experiences in the ESL classroom. The **objective** of reflective thinking is to develop self-awareness, critical analysis, and continuous improvement in both teaching and learning. It aims to help teachers refine their instructional strategies and enable students to assess their learning processes, identify challenges, and adopt effective problem-solving techniques. In the ESL classroom, reflective thinking fosters metacognition, enhances language acquisition, and promotes a more student-centered and adaptive learning environment.

Methodology/Methods. Methodology in reflective thinking involves various qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyzing self-assessment and critical evaluation in teaching and learning. Common methods include reflective journals, teacher and student self-assessments, peer observations, and feedback sessions. Action research is frequently used, allowing educators to systematically examine and refine their teaching practices through cycles of reflection and modification. Additionally, case studies and interviews help explore individual experiences with reflective thinking. In the ESL classroom, these methodologies enable both teachers and students to gain deeper insights into their learning processes, improving engagement and instructional effectiveness.

Results and Discussion. There are a number of moments throughout the learning process when reflection can be introduced to great effect.

First of all, before something important:

- Ask students to run through what they already know about the topic and share it with you in order to make them aware of the knowledge they already have or the gaps they need to cover.

- Before students are expected to do something — write a paper, choose a project, solve a problem, apply their learning, etc. Pausing here again provides an opening to assess understanding and simultaneously reinforces the connection between their learning and its practical use. It also makes it more likely that students will make good, well-informed choices as we advance.

Then, during something important:

– To the extent that students are working on research or other long-term projects, recurring reflection (on their own and with faculty) becomes a way to become conscious about the research process and the many assumptions and decisions that can inform it, as well as to assess various methods for uncovering and creating and acting upon information and knowledge. A checklist or short reflective paper can be a good process method.

And finally, after something important:

– You can also introduce this kind of activity just after discussing a topic so that students can assess their understanding of the material—and perhaps so that you can assess their understanding, too. This also gives them a chance to think about how the material might relate to other material they’ve studied, to their lived experience more generally, or to broader social dynamics or issues.

– At a moment like this — just after a learning experience — you can focus reflection on not just the material but also on the experience of learning. You could ask students what was most effective in helping them to understand (for example, was it when the teacher restated the main points, when visual aids were used, when students did hands-on work applying the ideas, or when they debated the topic?), and which moments left them the most confused. Whatever the form, activities like these can provide you with teaching feedback and give students insight into their own learning processes.

The most common place for a reflective thinking process is a class. How to introduce reflection into your lessons:

– Making sure that you give students enough time to analyze all aspects of a question before answering it.

– Constantly assessing learning situations to determine what the students already know, what they need to know but don’t, and what they learned from the whole experience.

– Providing support to students and encouraging them to analyze and evaluate their conclusions constantly.

– Giving them tasks they are likely to encounter in everyday life and encouraging them to reflect on how they chose to complete them.

– Stimulating their ability to think reflectively by asking them questions that require logical reasoning and providing evidence.

– Guiding them through their thought process by providing various helpful explanations.

– Exposing students to different points of view by creating intellectually diverse groups and encouraging group activities

– Adopting a less structured learning context by allowing students to discover what they think is relevant and important to their education

– Encouraging students to write down their opinions on various matters, give valid, logical, and factual reasons for why they hold those opinions, acknowledge opposite viewpoints, and look for weaknesses in their own arguments.

By the way, there are many problems to anticipate while prompting students to reflect on their progress, for instance:

– Time: Reflection takes time, but if the only time we allocate to it is home learning time, we should not be surprised when it is ineffective. Reflection is best when it begins immediately, and adjacent to the experience we are reflecting on. We have missed an opportunity if we let our students leave our classroom without time to reflect upon their learning.

– Modelling: When do our students see adults, especially teachers, reflecting on their learning? If the answer is almost never, how might we change this? What opportunities might we make to join with our students in reflective practice such that they see what it looks like for an experienced learner?

– Routines: When we make reflection a routine part of our classroom, we ensure it is valued. Schools run on routines and have a routine for everything that is important. If we don't have routines for reflective practice, but we do have routines for putting our bags on a hook, do we truly value reflection?

– Language: Our students benefit from learning a language that supports their reflective practice. This might be as simple as a set of questions we ask as we reflect. Of these, perhaps the most powerful are versions of «What makes you say or think that?». It is also advantageous to consider how our thinking has changed through the use of routines such as «I used to think... but now I think...»

– Interactions: Creating a safe space in which to reflect occurs as a result of our positive interactions with our students. If in our interactions with students, we send the message that we seek only correct answers or responses that stroke our fragile egos, student reflections will be shallow and false. When we value genuine reflections, we also value students sharing their misunderstandings and the times when our teaching missed the mark. How we respond will set the tone and encourage continued reflection or end it quickly.

– Environment: Do we have space away from noise and distraction? Are there calm spaces where individuals might be alone with their thoughts? Do our walls share examples of our reflective practice or only samples of finished work that suggest the learning ceases when the assignment is published?

We must confess, that the process of reflective thinking demands various actions. There is a wide range of activities and strategies that enable reflective thinking and improving implementation in the class.

– *What? So What? What Now?*

One of the most straight-forward frameworks to support critical reflection is Rolfe's, Freshwaters' and Jaspers' (2001) [4] reflective model based upon three simple questions: What? So what? Now what?. The What? part is simply describing the situation. The So what? part is where what happened is analyzed and explained. It is where most of the references will be if required. Rolfe et al. consider the final part Now what? as the one that can make the greatest contribution to practice [4].

What? What happened? What did you learn? What did you do? What did you expect? What was different? What was your reaction?

So What? Why does it matter? What are the consequences and meanings of your experiences? How do your experiences link to your academic, professional and/or personal development?

Now What? What are you going to do as a result of your experiences? What will you do differently? How will you apply what you have learned?

– *The Gibbs' (1988) reflection model [2].*

This model is particularly useful for helping students learn from situations that they experience regularly, particularly those that do not go as anticipated. Although this model can be easy for beginners because it has six steps to work through, it has been criticized for a lack of critical thinking and analysis or an attempt for the student to view the experience from different perspectives.



Fig. 1. Gibbs Reflective Cycle

Step 1: Description: what happened?

Potential prompts: What, where and when did this happen? What did you do? In what order did things occur? What were you responsible for? What was the result?

Step 2: Feelings: what were you thinking?

Potential prompts: What was your initial reaction, and what does this tell you? Did your feelings change? What were you thinking? What did you feel during / after the situation? What do you think about it now? What do you think other people feel about the situation now?

Step 3: Evaluation: What was good or bad about the experience?

Potential prompts: What went well? What were the challenges? Who/what was unhelpful? Why? What did you and others do to contribute to the situation (positively or negatively)? What needs improvement?

Step 4: Analysis: What sense can you make of the situation?

Potential prompts: What similarities or differences are there between this experience and other experiences? What choices did you make and what effect did they have? What did you do well? What did others do well? What went wrong or did not turn out how it should have been done? In what way did you or others contribute to this?

Step 5: Conclusion: what else could you have done?

Potential prompts: What factors that affected the outcome? What might have been some alternative actions or approaches? What might you have done differently? Could negative events be avoided? Could positive events be made more effective?

Step 6: Action plan: what will you do next time?

Potential prompts: If a similar situation/experience arose again, what would you do? What will you do if you encounter this kind of situation again? What will you do in the future to increase the likelihood of similar positive outcomes and minimize the likelihood of similar negative outcomes? What do you need to learn?

Others activities:

– *Rose, Thorn, Bud* to activate students' thinking and prompt them to reflect on their day [3].

– *Self-reflection score sheet*. It prompts learners to score themselves based on their performance in different areas of the classroom. Once the task is complete, take time to discuss each category and brainstorm ways to enhance all learning experiences and areas.

– *Time capsule*. Creating a time capsule is something that can be done individually or collaborated on as a class. At the beginning of the year, have students place a few keepsakes and notes into a capsule. Bury it and then dig it up at the end of the year to reflect on all that has changed.

– *Word collages*. This self-awareness activity gives learners an opportunity to reflect on personal values, beliefs, and more!

– *Strengths and challenges*. This mindfulness practice helps students outline their strengths and personal challenges. To extend the activity, have learners develop an action plan for how they wish to overcome the difficulties they face.

– *Reflection buddy*. Pair your students up and have them spend a few minutes reflecting together. This activity can be completed after a specific task or at the end of the school day. Be sure to design an appropriate structure for asking and answering self-reflection activities so that everyone remains on track with the task at hand.

Conclusions. In conclusion, this study highlights the essential role of reflective thinking in enhancing critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving skills. Through reflective practices, individuals are better equipped to assess their experiences, identify strengths and weaknesses, and apply learned lessons to future situations. The findings suggest that reflective thinking fosters deeper learning and personal growth, particularly in educational and professional settings. However, the study also indicates that effective reflection requires guidance, time, and a structured approach. Therefore, integrating reflective practices into curricula and professional development programs can greatly benefit individuals by enhancing self-awareness and improving performance.

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