
THE LEARNER DEVELOPMENT JOURNAL

学習者ディベロップメント研究部会誌

ISSN: 2433-5401

<https://ldjournal.ld-sig.org>

The Learner Development Journal Issue 6: Learner Development Beyond The Classroom

Author: Ann Flanagan

Title: Building a Critical Reflective Practice With High School Language Learners

Date of publication online: 2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTSIG.LDJ6-2>

Author contact: <[ann\(at\)fkf\(dot\)ritsumei\(dot\)ac\(dot\)jp](mailto:ann(at)fkf(dot)ritsumei(dot)ac(dot)jp)>

Published by the Japan Association for Language Teaching
Learner Development Special Interest Group, Tokyo

<https://ld-sig.org/>

Copyright 2022 each respective author

This article can be cited as:

Flanagan, A. (2022). Building a critical reflective practice with high school language learners. *The Learner Development Journal*, 6, 13–32. <https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTSIG.LDJ6-2>

This article is part of a collection of practitioner research on the theme of “Learner Development Beyond the Classroom” for Issue 6 of the *Learner Development Journal* (LDJ6), edited by Isra Wongsarnpigoon, Dominique Vola Ambinintsoa, Phillip A. Bennett, and André Parsons. Published once a year, each issue of the *Learner Development Journal* follows a Community of Practices approach over a period of approximately 18 months in which contributors work together, under the guidance of the editors, to share, respond to, and develop their research and writing.

Articles are published in the Learner Development Journal under a Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY), of which CC BY 4.0 is the most recent version. Under this agreement, authors grant users the right to unrestricted dissemination and re-use of the work. They ask only that proper attribution is given to the work.

Building a Critical Reflective Practice With High School Language Learners

Ann Flanagan, Ritsumeikan Junior and Senior High School, Japan
<ann(at)fkf(dot)ritsumeikan(dot)ac(dot)jp>

It is rare for language learners, especially young learners, to have the awareness to reflect on their language learning process. This study examines the use of critical reflective writing journals in high school. It follows the journey of two female high school students through three stages of critical reflection: reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for-action. Students were encouraged to practice consistent reflection outside the classroom, writing twice or three times a week. This case study is aimed at exploring critical reflection, learning beyond the classroom, and motivation. The students applied critical thinking skills to analyze and modify their own learning. Journaling facilitated a greater sense of self-awareness in students, which enabled them to identify their own strengths and improve areas of weakness in language learning. In their view, journals were a valuable resource for studying English. Results support the adoption of critical reflection practices encouraging students to become more involved in their language learning. In becoming more responsible for their learning, students begin to make conscious choices about what they are interested in exploring further while monitoring and evaluating their progress.

言語学習者、特に若い学習者にとって、自分の言語学習過程を振り返る意識を持つことは稀である。本研究は、高等学校における批判的省察文ジャーナルの使用について検討する。4人の女子高校生が、行動に関する考察、行動のための考察、行動中の考察という3つの段階を経て、批判的な考察を行う過程を追ったものである。生徒たちは、教室外で、週に2、3回書くという一貫したリフレクションスタイルを実践するよう促された。この研究の目的は、批判的省察、教室を超えた学習、モチベーションを探ることである。生徒たちは、批判的思考スキルを応用して、自分たちの学習を分析し、修正した。ジャーナルは、生徒の自己認識力を高め、その結果言語学習における自身の強みを認識し、弱点となる分野を改善することを可能にした。参加者は、ジャーナルが英語学習にとって貴重なリソースとなったという見解を示した。この結果は、生徒が批判的な省察の実践を採用することが、自身の言語学習により深く関与することを可能にするという仮説を支持するものである。その過程で、学生は自分の学習にもっと責任を持つようになり、自分の進歩を監視し評価しながら、さらに探究心が刺激されることを意識的に選択するようになるのです。

Keywords

critical reflection, learning beyond the classroom, motivation, journal writing
批判的省察、教室を超えた学習、モチベーション、ジャーナルライティング

I have been a secondary education teacher for more than 20 years, and one question that I ask my students at the beginning of the year is about their goals for the class. Nine out of 10 times, their response is to be fluent in English. This is a lofty goal for students to achieve in less than a year, considering their busy high school life. Fluency, to my students, means not only speaking and writing quickly but also being able to navigate the target language to understand, be understood, and express themselves in both oral and written contexts. However, it is difficult to meet each student's learning needs when proficiency levels differ in each class. So, instead of giving students a list of ways to improve their English proficiency, I began to think of ways for students to take responsibility for their learning.

Empowering students, especially teenagers, to take responsibility for their learning is not an easy task. First, you have to convince them that it is a meaningful activity worth their time trying. Then, you have to be consistently there for them throughout the journey, which is not always possible for high school teachers, especially considering their workload. I have found that having students set realistic goals is a great way to encourage

them to take responsibility for their learning. By setting and achieving goals, students gain self-confidence and become more willing to keep trying.

I have always practiced critical reflection in my teaching. It is a skill I have developed over time, and it has helped me be a better teacher, facilitator, and mentor. My journey as a critical reflective practitioner began with reading books by John Dewey and Parker Palmer. It continued to deepen through my MA in TESOL at the School for International Training (SIT, Brattleboro, Vermont). It is there that I learned about the Kolb experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). I explored what I taught, why I taught the way I did, and how I could be a better teacher for my students. The late Dr. Steve Cornwell was my advisor during my teaching practicum, and he worked with me to hone these skills. The Kolb experiential learning cycle was a powerful tool for me to use to learn about my role as a teacher, discover what and how I teach, learn how I interact with my students and how they interact with each other, and create better interactive material for my classes. I believe that having a facilitator is also important because a facilitator can ask questions to help unlock the answers within the individuals that they work with. In my personal experience, Dr. Cornwell helped me to summarize my thoughts better by being more concise. He also challenged me to go deeper in reflection on various aspects of my teaching. Through reflection, we can see past our sometimes-narrow ways of thinking that can limit us and lead to exploring new learning methods that may, in turn, facilitate change (Fook, 2011).

In my own work as a teacher, I wanted to know whether what I did in my own reflective practice would help students in their journeys to become more proficient in English. In this paper, I examine whether critical reflection can strengthen students' motivation to learn English by helping them analyze, reconsider, and question what and how they learn. In addition, I explore the challenges I faced when conducting this research. Finally, I offer some solutions for how I would improve the critical reflection activity in the future. I hope other educators who are interested in using critical reflection as a supplement to classroom instruction and who want their students to take more ownership of their language learning will benefit from the narratives presented in this paper.

Key Themes in This Exploration: Critical Reflection, Learning Beyond the Classroom, and Motivation

In reflective learning, students are encouraged to develop critical thinking skills and become aware of their own learning processes. Reflective learning for students involves reflecting on what they have learned, analyzing their experiences, and finding alternative ways to improve.

As a problem-solving tool, reflection helps teachers and students understand their strengths and weaknesses after an experience. As Dewey (1933) pointed out, "We learn from reflection on experience, not from experience itself" (pp. 78–79). Looking reflectively back on past experiences, learners can construct new meanings based on their acquired knowledge. As a teacher, I believe that learners actively involved in their own learning have the capacity to create their own learning approaches if they are given decision-making opportunities. Creating an environment in which learners develop sound reflective practices around such learning opportunities can build confidence and a sense of responsibility for their learning actions.

In this respect, two types of reflection that I find personally meaningful are Schön's (1983) *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. The first stage of critical reflection is

reflection-in-action. Students who reflect in action are able to reshape situations and activities they are working on as they unfold, in other words, “thinking on their feet.” By doing so, students reflect on what they are doing in the moment, leading to a new understanding of the experience and a change in the situation. Let us consider a student who has set aside 30 minutes to study vocabulary. Their task includes listening to the audio recording and writing the word and example sentences. However, during the study period, they receive text messages from their friends. At this time, the student has to decide whether to fully engage with the text messages or disregard them. They also need to recognize whether a distraction interferes with their learning or if their approach is proving successful. Making such decisions is a key part of reflection-in-action.

The second type of reflection, *reflection-on-action*, means to reflect on an experience, situation, or phenomenon after it has occurred. Students reflect on the situation by exploring why they acted the way they did, and whether or not they could have acted differently. The student looks at their overall improvement, or lack of success or progress, on a specific learning task or goal. After the previously mentioned student studies vocabulary for 30 minutes, from 9:00 p.m. until 9:30 p.m., they reflect on their experience. The student decides that this time is not beneficial to study because they were falling asleep and could not concentrate on the task, so they decide to shift the vocabulary study time to the following morning.

In the critical reflection process, the next stage is where individuals begin to look towards future actions. Farrell (2013) identifies this third stage in the reflection process as *reflection-for-action*. This is the most difficult for students because they have to anticipate what will occur in the next task and consider how to improve further or change their current language learning before the task takes place. Examples of students’ reflection-for-action will be included later in the discussion.

Developing the practice of critical reflection by doing journal writing can be a rewarding and transforming experience for those who embark on the journey. So, to support students’ reflective practices, I drew on these three types of reflection (reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for-action) to guide students in their journal writing (see Figure 1).

Students moved from one stage to the next to look at their tasks from a different perspective. By moving through each stage in this order, students could go deeper into their reflection and decide further actions, which Mezirow (1990) refers to as *transformative learning*.

The students’ language learning is not limited to the classroom, as it can occur anywhere and at any time. By engaging in learning beyond the classroom, learners can address some of the limitations of classroom-based learning, such as insufficient authentic input and output (Nunan & Richards, 2015). The internet, technology, and media make it easier to use English effectively and authentically in real-life interactions and virtual social networks (Richards, 2015), and, as Nunan (1991) has pointed out, learners’ application of emerging skills outside the classroom is crucial to developing their second language. Because high school students spend so much time using their devices to engage with technology, from games to social networking sites, it can be a source of engagement that students like. By reflecting on these activities, learners will be able to determine which activities work best for improving their proficiency. Additionally, they can adapt different activities based on their reflection to support their goals.

Date	
Task	
Time Started:	Time Finished
Brief Description of the Task:	
Reflection in Action:	
Reflection on Action:	
Reflection for Action:	

Figure 1. Journal Format

The final key theme that I started from is motivation. Motivation helps learners endure the ups and downs of learning something challenging. Without sufficient motivation, learners cannot achieve their long-term goals. For this project, I find Dörnyei's (2001) conceptualization of motivation at three levels—the language level, the learner level, and the learning situation level—useful for looking at and understanding learners' changing motivation. First, the language level focuses on the student's learning goals and the usefulness of proficiency in the target language. In contrast, the learner level focuses on confidence, competence, and self-efficacy (Dörnyei, 1994). Within this level, one might consider whether students are curious and energized by their learning. Are they self-determined in their learning? In separating the levels, Dörnyei believed that each had its own effect. When initiating this study, within the specific learning situation of this high school's English classes, I wanted my participants to have total autonomy in designing

their own learning plans to improve their English language proficiency while sustaining their motivation.

Research Focus

As I wanted to explore the critical reflection practice that I use in my daily life to see if it would impact my students' language study outside the classroom, I decided on the following questions to guide my research:

1. How does building a critical reflection practice with high school students affect their language proficiency and motivation to learn a language?
2. Do students experience any learning transformations during the critical reflection process?

I see this research as a case study, which is a common framework for conducting qualitative research with learners as it lets practitioner-researchers explore "the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (Stake, 1995, p. xi). The aim of this case study was to develop a deeper, detailed understanding about the role of critical reflection in students' language learning outside the classroom.

Participants, Timeline, and Research Procedure

For this research, I focused on the written journals of two female Japanese high school students. The two participants, Mika and Aoi (both pseudonyms of their choosing), had been students of mine for 3 years at the start of this research. They had mixed levels of English ability, ranging from Grade Pre-1 (CEFR B2) to Grade 2 (CEFR B1) on the EIKEN Test. EIKEN is a test of practical English proficiency taken mainly by junior and senior high school students in Japan. Before participating, students were informed of the requirements of the research project and volunteered to participate by signing a consent form. They were also told that they could withdraw at any time. Parental consent and school consent were also granted to participate.

Introducing Aoi

Aoi had been learning English since she was 7 years old. She started to study English in primary school. Students at her primary school learned English as a tool for communication. She had English classes twice a week in the first and second years, increasing to three times a week until the end of 6th grade. She did not attend a private English conversation school to support her language learning outside her daily education at primary school. She participated in a study abroad program in Australia for 2 months when she was 11. Her English proficiency level at the time of this study was at EIKEN Pre-1, and her TOEFL ITP score was 530. She wanted to concentrate on speaking, vocabulary, writing, EIKEN, and the TOEFL IBT. She listened to music and watched American TV shows with Japanese and English subtitles to study English. Occasionally, she practiced shadowing with CNN English Express or TED Talks.

If Aoi was not interested in something, she saw no point in studying it. In her response to the survey question, "What strategies are you using to learn English now?", she wrote in English: *I listen to music or watch TV, I don't do it for the entertainment value, but I want to memorize how words are used and expressions that singers and actors use when using English.*

Specifically, she hoped to achieve Level 1 on the EIKEN Test, score 6.0 on IELTS, and be more proficient in English so that she could participate in school-related events in English.

Introducing Mika

Mika had been learning English since she was 12 years old. She passed the third EIKEN level and scored 368 on the TOEFL ITP. She wanted to focus on reading, speaking, and passing Level 2 of the EIKEN test. Mika enjoyed playing online games in English. Using game language to learn English was one of her favorite things. To study these specific English phrases, she kept a vocabulary notebook. On the left side of the paper, she wrote English sentences; on the right, she wrote Japanese sentences. However, she realized that this method was not working for her.

Mika had trouble distinguishing certain English phonemes. On her SMART Goal Worksheet (Appendix A), she wrote: *Being able to hear sounds is important when speaking and listening. I want to hear what the teacher has to say clearly.* Her worksheet also conveyed this: *If I could hear all the words in a conversation, I would be able to understand and follow it and not feel intimidated by participating in conversations.* This shows that she was developing a level of awareness of her transformational journey in critical reflection.

Table 1. Research Timeline

Time period	Steps taken
March 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invitations to participate were sent out to students in the 12th Grade Global Learning Course and Super Science Global Course • Five students independently volunteered • Parental consent and school permission were granted
Phase 1 April 2021–May 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs analysis questionnaire was administered • SMART goal worksheet was completed • Three aspects of critical reflection were explained (<i>reflection-in-action</i>, <i>reflection-on-action</i>, and <i>reflection-for-action</i>) • Students began journaling at least twice a week (reflection journals collected every other week) • I provided feedback on their journals to support this type of critical reflection
Phase 2 June 2021–July 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students continued journaling at least twice a week • Peer Groups were introduced to support this type of critical reflection • Reflection journals were collected every other week • I offered feedback in the form of reflective questioning to support them in going deeper into their reflective practice • In July, Padlet was introduced to offer another way to interact in Peer Groups
Phase 3 August 2021–December 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I met with students individually to see if they wanted to change their SMART Goals • Students continued journaling twice a week • Students moved their journaling online due to my being overseas
Phase 4 January 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I met with students individually to get their feedback about critical reflection

The project lasted from April 2021 until mid-January 2022, and Table 1 outlines the steps I took for my research from March 2021 until January 2022 as the project developed over those 9 months. In Phase 1, I conducted a needs analysis to gather background information about my students. I also explained how to fill out the SMART goal worksheet and do critical reflection journaling, so they could start writing in their journals. To support their reflection practice, I reviewed their journals and provided feedback. They continued their critical reflection practice in Phase 2 with the addition of peer groups. To help students dive deeper into their practices, questions were provided for each phase of critical reflection. In Phases 3 and 4, students explored different language activities to reach their goals. Through critical reflection, they were able to determine what worked and what did not. The benefits of critical reflection and the power it has on learning beyond the classroom became evident to them.

In April 2021, students answered a basic Google Form Questionnaire (Appendix B) about themselves. The questionnaire was used to gather information about (a) the length of time they had been studying English, (b) their English proficiency levels (EIKEN and TOEFL ITP), (c) the language skills they wished to focus on during the project, (d) the strategies they use now to study English, (e) the strategies that are not working for them, and (f) their personal goals for this project.

Next, in early May 2021, I met with the students on Zoom to go over what they needed to do with the SMART Goals Framework. Because we use Google Classroom for our regular classes, I created a new class, *Ann's Research Group*, where I uploaded a SMART Goal worksheet, an interactive PowerPoint slideshow, and a goal-setting worksheet for students to complete at home. The students used this framework to help them create achievable goals. "SMART" is an acronym (O'Neill et al., 2006) for "Specific" (What precisely is being pursued?), "Measurable" (Has the goal been accomplished?), "Achievable" (Can the goal be achieved?), "Relevant" (Does this seem worthwhile?), and "Time-Bound" (Can the goal be completed in a reasonable timeframe?). This framework was used to give students an organizational structure to work with and a sense of direction to reach their goals. Students could write their SMART Goals framework in English or Japanese (See Figures 2 and 3 for an example). To make the framework, I used a template found on Southern Oregon University's website (OfficeArrow.com, 2008), so that the students would need to think deeply about their goals and try to identify possible obstacles they might encounter and actions they could take to avoid them.

Introducing the Critical Reflection Journal

In mid-May, I met with the students to show them the format for writing in their reflection journal. Each student was given a notebook for their journal. Students wrote the date, independent learning task, time started, and time finished. Then, they had to write a *reflection-in-action*, *reflection-on-action*, and *reflection-for-action*. They could choose how often to reflect, but it had to be at least two times a week, so students could develop their reflective practice. I collected the journals every other week. In the beginning, students wrote in their notebooks, but some wanted more flexibility in being able to write journal entries online. They felt this would give them more freedom to reflect anywhere and anytime. I accepted either. Students wrote between 14 to 17 journal entries from Phase 1 to Phase 2. In Phase 3, students were busy with various activities at school and applications for universities, so there was a slight decrease in journal entries.

SMART Goal Worksheet

Today's Date: 2021.5.10 Target Date: 2021.10.10 Start Date: _____

Date Achieved: _____

Goal: Pass Eiken grade 1

Verify that your goal is SMART

Specific: What exactly will you accomplish?
10月10日: 実施される第二回採用英語技能検定の一試験に合格する
(Pass the Eiken grade 1 primary exam in October)

Measurable: How will you know when you have reached this goal?
合格が10月25日にインターネット上で公開される
Pass / Fail will be published on the Internet in October.

Achievable: Is achieving this goal realistic with effort and commitment? Have you got the resources to achieve this goal? If not, how will you get them?
1月に全く勉強して11年11月試験を受けた時、合格点2028点まで
あと160点だった。もう少し単語を勉強すれば受かる可能性は十分に高いと思う。
When I took the exam in January without studying at all, my score was only 160 points lower than the passing score, 2028.

Relevant: Why is this goal significant to your life?
大学で留学に行くときや家庭教師のバイト、就職をする時などに求められる
It is required when I want to go study abroad etc

Timely: When will you achieve this goal?
高校を卒業するまでに
By the time I graduate from high school

This goal is important because:
TOEFLやTOEICとは異なり、英検は一生効力を与える
(Eiken is a qualification that is valid for a lifetime)

The benefits of achieving this goal will be:
英語力の向上、英語の宿題が楽になる、進路の選択肢が広がる
(Improve my English skill, make my English HW easier, and expand my career options)

Take Action!

Potential Obstacles	Potential Solutions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ 片木・このまの(後回しに) (skip studying) ◦ 勉強する時間がない (Not having time to study) ◦ アパートに近すぎると勉強が難しい (No opportunity to output speaking/writing) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ 英語の勉強する時間を見出す → 朝? (decide when to study English) → Morning? ◦ 通学時間などはスキマ時間を利用 (make use of small pockets of time such as commuting time) ◦ 先生や友達に手伝ってもらう (ask my teachers and friends to help me)

Who are the people you will ask to help you?
先生、友達、HelloTalk などのネイティブスピーカー
(My teacher, friends, native speaker in HelloTalk app.)

Specific Action Steps: What steps need to be taken to get you to your goal?

What?	Expected Completion Date	Completed
★ Get 100% score X5 on Quizlet		
◦ Verb Link A (233 words)	→ by May 29	
◦ Noun Link A (239 words)	→ by June 15	
◦ Adj and Adverb Link A (228 words)	→ by June 25	
★ Listening & Dictation Practice	→ Twice a week	

Figure 2. Aoi's SMART Goal Worksheet

SMART Goal Worksheet

Today's Date: 5/15 Target Date: 11/30 Start Date: 5/5

Date Achieved: _____

Goal: I will be able to hear small words

Verify that your goal is SMART

Specific: What exactly will you accomplish?
I want to be able to hear sounds. I don't know fluent English.

Measurable: How will you know when you have reached this goal?
Whether it is acquired through conversation, whether I can hear the small words.

Achievable: Is achieving this goal realistic with effort and commitment? Have you got the resources to achieve this goal? If not, how will you get them?
Many people tell you to train your ears first. This is because it is the order that babies learn first.

Relevant: Why is this goal significant to your life?
Because being able to speak English will help me in my future. I want to get involved in politics. It could make diplomatic relations smoother.

Timely: When will you achieve this goal?
I think it will take three months. This is something to look at in the long term.

This goal is important because:
Being able to hear sounds is important when speaking and listening
I want to hear what the teacher has to say clearly

The benefits of achieving this goal will be:

- I will be able to hear conversations. I will be able to follow.
- It also makes it easier to solve problems on test.
- I'll be able to hear the news.

Take Action!

Potential Obstacles	Potential Solutions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm still getting used to English. • I'm afraid of conversations. • I'm scared of my surroundings. • I like it consciously 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Listen a lot. - unafraid of. - not feel intimidated. - Try to interpret on English movie.

Who are the people you will ask to help you?
School teachers, English-speaking friends, YouTube and other video sites, online game, CD.

Specific Action Steps: What steps need to be taken to get you to your goal?

What?	Expected Completion Date	Completed
• I will watch a lot of movies and become sound.	9/30	
• Listening to English music on the way to and from school every day.	(three months)	

Figure 3. Mika's SMART Goal Worksheet

Throughout the collection periods, I provided feedback. In the beginning, I gave more guidance about how to write in the journal, especially when they asked questions directly to me in their journal or in person. Some questions were administrative: *Can I give my notebook to you on Monday instead of Friday?* Others were technical questions: *Can I type my journal instead of handwriting it?* or *Can I slow the audio speed down?* However, some questions were about reflecting: *How can I improve my reflecting skills?* and *How do I ask myself questions?* We also met periodically at lunchtime or online using Zoom for check-ins. After the summer vacation, I began to write comments such as *Can you tell me more?* or *What did you learn?* to help them go deeper into their reflections.

Peer Learning and Feedback

It was also important for students to give feedback to each other. Encouraging peer interaction not only fosters critical reflection and communicative skills but also builds community (Boud et al., 1999) so that students can use their personal learning experiences to help each other. In July, I asked students to interact collaboratively with each other on Padlet, a platform where students can post documents, videos, comments, and audio to a digital wall. By talking to each other or writing comments on Padlet about problems they were encountering, students were able to suggest new strategies for each other to try. Some suggestions were to try dictation, read shorter passages, write summaries, and watch movies (see Figure 4). We often use this platform for our classes and online student conferences at my high school.

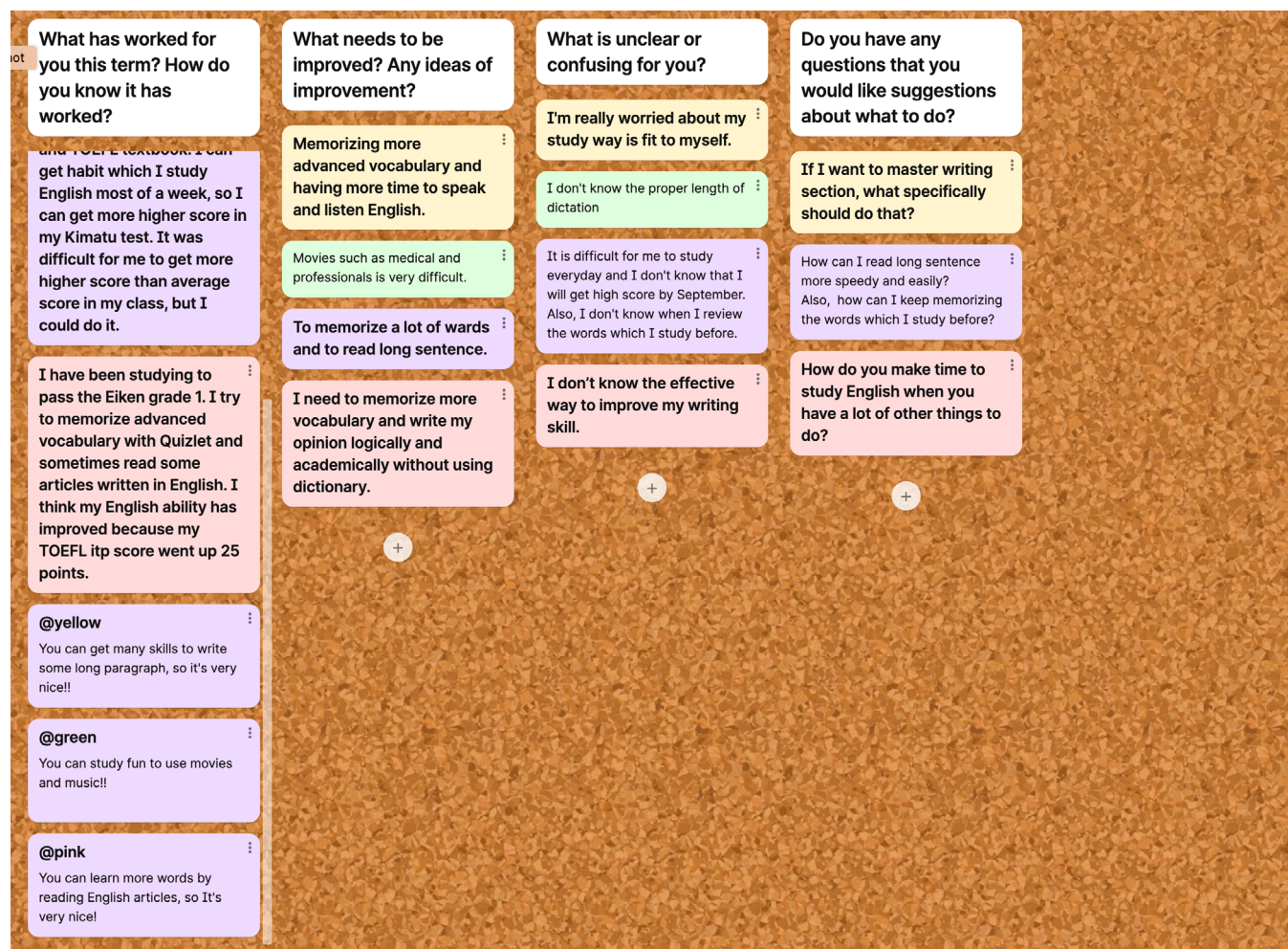


Figure 4. Padlet Interaction

Insights from Aoi's and Mika's Critical Reflection Journeys

The primary methods of data collection I used were journal entries from the students' handwritten journal notebooks (Phases 1 and 2), which later shifted online in Phase 3. I organized the qualitative data into two categories, oral and written, and applied interpretational analysis to the data. This involved a systematic procedure of coding and classifying the data to explore constructs, themes, and patterns as they emerged (Gall et al., 2005). Here I highlighted consistent themes in the journal, for example, places of distraction, frustration, and change. In addition, I underlined words of emotion such as "happy" and "disappointed." By doing this, I could identify the commonalities and uniqueness of Aoi and Mika's critical reflection journeys. From here, I present a summary interpretation of both students' critical reflections on their English learning journeys. I follow this with a reflection on my own learnings and realizations.

Aoi's Journey

Aoi wrote 17 journal entries from June until the end of September. In her SMART Goal Worksheet, she expressed a desire to pass Level 1 on the EIKEN Proficiency Exam by March 2022. Getting a high score on this test is necessary to attend an overseas university. She felt that the benefits of achieving this goal would be to improve her English skills and expand her career options after graduating from university. Some of the obstacles she felt would prevent her from achieving the goal were insufficient time to study or lack of opportunities for output like speaking and writing. When we met in May to go over her SMART Goal Worksheet, she wanted to focus on learning vocabulary, as seen in the Specific Action Steps (see Figure 2). Additionally, according to the needs analysis questionnaire that was given to students in April, one of her personal goals for this research project was to improve her vocabulary skills.

High school students often study vocabulary by writing the English word and its Japanese meaning next to it. In June, Aoi started to study vocabulary by using Quizlet (a digital flashcard application). She wanted to review some study cards she had previously used in her English class. However, when she began studying vocabulary at 9:00 p.m., she noticed that she became sleepy: *While reviewing the vocabulary, I felt drowsy sometimes. I drank a glass of cold water to shake off the sleepiness.* Here she noticed that she had a problem, and she quickly changed her behavior to continue. As she reflected on the action: *After reviewing the vocabulary, I noticed that I forgot the majority of the words even though I have spent a lot of time memorizing, she concluded: I was surprised that how I forgot the learning of vocabularies even though I could memorize them once. I think it's better not to leave a long time between reviews.* From that point on, she began to study fewer words but did so more frequently during the week.

A week later, Aoi decided to watch a 20-minute TED Talk video in English. As she was watching it, she noticed that she could not catch some of the words the presenter was saying, so she turned on the English subtitles. She continued: *Next time I watch a TED talk video in English, I should list up the words that I can't understand and write a summary and opinion.* Aoi began to notice that there are different ways to learn vocabulary. She did not have to use Quizlet only.

In July, Aoi began to write more about her mood: *I was not in the mood for studying with a pencil, so I watched Netflix to learn English.* Because she had the choice of watching the program *Terrace House* with English subtitles, she was able to reflect: *I enjoyed watching it, so I can continue this learning. I was able to see English translations of Japanese people's daily*

conversations, so I was able to learn English expressions that are easy to use. This shows that Aoi was gaining a new insight into her learning style. She seemed to be departing from her SMART goals and choosing resources that do not help her with exam-related vocabulary (see Figure 2). She also spent more time watching *Terrace House* than she did studying vocabulary.

Towards the end of July, Aoi's focus shifted from EIKEN to getting a high score on IELTS, which was required to enter a competitive program at the university of her choice. In her journal, she wrote: *I've been so busy working on my uni application. From today, studying English is a top priority for me. My goal: HIGH SCORE ON IELTS!* Her journal entries reflected a shift in her learning strategies, too. Figure 5 shows how her tasks became more creative and seemed to suit her learning style more. This also shows that she is experimenting with different ways to learn new words. Aoi wrote: *I think this method is nice. I enjoyed doing it. The important thing is to continue.*

From September, Aoi once again changed her focus from learning vocabulary to preparing for the IELTS writing section. Her tasks shifted to reading and memorizing example answers from the IELTS practice tests. As she reflected on the action: *Write what I remember and highlight the parts I forgot. Must write again and again,* she began to develop a new learning strategy. She further reflected: *I hope this exercise will help me with my IELTS test! But it takes time to memorize.* She practiced this strategy for about a month until she was able to achieve the required score to enter the university program. She added a time limit to simulate the actual time she would have for the IELTS writing section. She reflected: *I think I did a good job. But next time, I will set a time limit like a test.*

Towards the end of September, Aoi took the IELTS test and attained a 7.0 in the listening section and 6.0 on the other sections. She received an overall score of 6.5 and was accepted into the university program of her choice. In her journal she wrote: *The XXX program requires students to get an overall 6.5 so I can apply with this result! YAY!*

After she gained acceptance into the program, she continued to use Quizlet, but she also used other tools that interested her such as Netflix, TED Talks, and podcasts to challenge herself to learn new vocabulary. She remarked: *I am happy that my band scores of listening and reading increased. But I should have practiced speaking more.* She further elaborated: *I tried to do my best, but my speaking test ended terribly. ... I should have been calmer. I couldn't say what I wanted to say. I have a week to prepare for the next IELTS, so I will work harder.*

Overall, Aoi mentioned in a written note I received in January that she was happy with her progress and that this style of journal writing really made her focus when she was studying. It was challenging, but she could see her overall progress. She enjoyed the freedom of doing what she liked to do to learn English. She wanted to continue doing this type of journal writing at university.

Aoi achieved many things during her critical reflective journey. First, she began to realize that watching TED Talk videos and Netflix series motivated her more to learn English because she was able to listen to natural English. In addition, she began to try different learning strategies for her vocabulary study, such as drawing pictures and writing new expressions from English subtitles. Through critical reflection, she was able to recognize and change her habits when she became distracted during studying such as being interrupted by friends on SNS or being tired or hungry. She also learned how to get back on track with studying for tests after being distracted by *Terrace House*. This style of reflection-on-action helped her transform the way she studied and learned English.

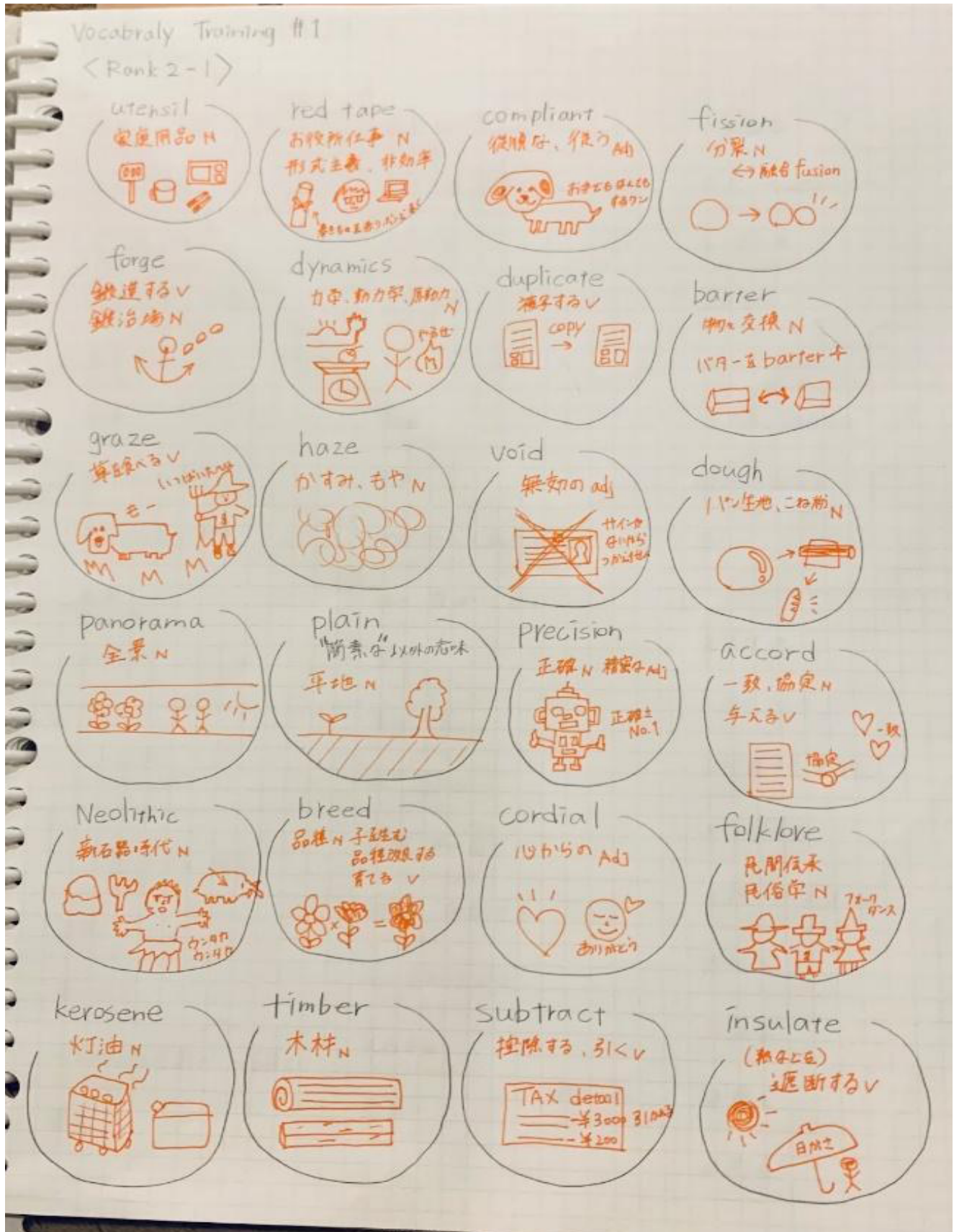


Figure 5. Aoi's New Way of Studying Vocabulary

Mika's Journey

Mika also completed 17 journal entries. When filling out her SMART goals worksheet, she indicated a desire to focus on improving her listening skills. She had difficulty picking up words when listening to two people speaking in a video, and she felt that it was important to improve her listening skills in order to have better conversations with foreigners. This goal was significant to her because she wanted to get involved in politics and she felt that being able to use English could make diplomatic relations smoother. Some specific benefits of achieving this goal were to be able to follow conversations better and to understand news broadcasts in English. Mika wrote that she was afraid of having conversations in English because at times she misunderstood what was being said.

Mika preferred to do shorter listening tasks lasting no more than 10 minutes. She mentioned in her journal: *I become nervous when I have long conversations. I thought that it was very important for her to know about her own learning style. She felt that her first listening task of transcribing a short conversation from *Genshin Impact* (an open-ended role-playing game) was too difficult, so she decided to focus on listening materials for children.*

Mika began to watch Disney films. She felt that listening to the spoken language was easier to follow: *I thought the words were easy for kids. And very easy to hear. I think Disney is good teaching material. She reflected: I did a good job today. If this is the case, I can continue. If it is too long, I'll lose motivation. But I want it to be a little longer.* Here is another example of transformation through reflection-on-action. In the next journal entry, Mika mentioned that she tried to listen to a longer conversation: *Today I heard a short conversation from Tangled. I felt like I could do this.* Mika began to gain more confidence as she challenged herself to increase the amount of time she spent listening to conversations and songs from Disney films.

Mika also noticed that when she was unable to understand all the words, she wanted to give up: *I heard it many times, but thought it was necessary to give up if I couldn't hear it.* Even though songs can be more difficult to understand than dialogue, she felt: *The use of idioms was easy to remember.*

As the song "Speechless" from *Aladdin* was slow, Mika found it easier to understand. She felt more confident after listening to it: *Today, I heard short music from Aladdin. This song is very slow and easy to hear. I thought how to use rhymes was amazing. It is difficult, but I learned the beauty of English.* Until the end of July, Mika continued listening to music in English. She associated the length of the song with her motivation: *The longest song is hard. The length that does not lose motivation is just right.*

After the summer vacation, Mika decided to change from listening to Disney songs to pop artists such as Adele and Taylor Swift. For these, she slowed the speed to 0.5x because she felt that she would be able to follow them better. However, she realized that this did not work because she was used to listening to the song at regular speed: *I realized that it is important to listen at the speed of a native speaker.*

By the end of September, Mika had gained more confidence in her listening skills. She gained 20 points on her TOEFL ITP score. Mika also felt that critical reflection was interesting because it gave her the tools to recognize that she wanted to try more listening strategies to improve her proficiency. When she began keeping her critical reflection journal, her choices for resources and tasks sometimes did not match up with her learning goals. Her main goal was: *To hear small words in conversations to follow them better which would make it easier to solve problems on tests. I'll be able to hear the news.* In a private conversation with me, Mika said: *I never had thought about how to improve my listening*

skills before doing this critical reflection journal. She was not sure if she would continue this journal activity in the future, because English was not going to be a priority. After hearing this, I began to wonder how I could encourage students to use this type of reflection in any part of their lives, not just their learning.

Through critical reflection, Mika became more confident in using conversational English. In the early stages, she was frustrated that she could not catch what was being said in conversations used in online role-playing games, so she decided to listen to songs that were easy for her to understand. By recognizing the causes and effects of the tasks she chose and the emotions she felt during the activities, transformative learning took place.

My Learnings and Realizations

Building a critical reflective practice with language learners can be a successful tool for students to use outside the classroom. Using the SMART Goal Worksheet (see Figures 2 and 3) helped students to think about potential obstacles such as receiving text messages from friends or falling asleep during studying that could prevent them from reaching their goals. The worksheet also asked students to think of potential solutions to the obstacles they had written. One such solution was for Aoi to put her phone in her bag, so her friends did not interrupt her studying.

The key point for students to build a critical reflective practice is receiving guidance from the teacher at specific points along the journey. Some students struggle or lose sight of their goals because they feel frustrated that they are not making progress, as in Mika's case. Aoi, on the other hand, was able to take risks and challenge herself. She asked more questions: *Ann sensei, what do you think about the way I took to improve my writing skills? Do you have any suggestions?* Aoi seemed like she was ready to act on her curiosity by asking questions, and she was not afraid to seek help when needed. It is important for teachers to encourage and scaffold this kind of behavior because it could effectively provide feedback to learners so they can plan the next steps toward attaining their goals and furthering their learning.

If I could do this research project again, I think I would encourage more feedback between me and each student as well as between the students themselves. By asking questions, Aoi was able to go deeper into her reflection compared to Mika. I felt Mika would have benefited more if we had done more peer reflection. She might have learned different ways to improve her listening and vocabulary skills from Aoi.

The process of learning another language can be a very emotional experience, as anyone who has tried it can attest. A key realization that emerged from this exploration was the level of emotions generated during the reflective cycle. Language learning can be positively or negatively affected by these different types of emotions. Throughout their journeys, Aoi and Mika experienced both ups and downs. Some words and phrases that they used to express their emotions included: "It was easy," "excited," "fun to learn new things," "YAY!" whereas other entries voiced: "frustration," "disorganized," "difficult to understand," "want to give up." It is important to note that students were becoming motivated to learn as a result of experiencing this range of emotions. Aoi conveyed: *I was very motivated to study! I could write a nice essay.* Mika voiced: *I did a good job today. If this is the case, I can continue.* As they continued to examine their activities deeply and make adjustments to reach their end goals, their learning beyond the classroom was becoming transformative.

Challenges and Improvements

I faced several challenges during this exploratory project. I would like to go over some suggestions for improvement should readers like to try critical reflection practices with their students. First, it would have been better, in the beginning, to have brainstormed different strategies for learning the four skills. Brainstorming might have given the students more activities to try to meet their goals. Students were able to come up with their own ideas individually, but it took a long time. Second, providing guiding questions (Appendix C) at the beginning of the study would have helped the students to reflect more deeply on the strategies they were using and how they could improve their approach to learning. If teachers notice that their students' depth of reflection is limited, guiding questions or prompts may help their students to reflect more deeply on their task. Third, I would provide more bilingual assistance to support students with lower levels of English proficiency. Three possibilities that come to mind are: (a) bilingual worksheets, (b) individually meeting with the students more regularly, and (c) students writing their journal entries in their L1 until they gained more confidence in using their L2. Mika might have benefited more from this activity if journaling in her L1 had been an option. She would have been able to dive more deeply into her reflection and perhaps find a stronger connection with what she was trying to achieve. Another possible change would be to use a model journal from this project, with permission from the writer, as an example to show future students how to develop critical reflection practices about their learning.

Conclusion

Learners can examine the strategies that they utilize to study English when they engage in critical reflective practices. Through reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for-action, students were able to evaluate their current approaches to learning. Mezirow (1990) defines critical reflection as an activity that students engage in to analyze the relevance and appropriateness of their assumptions and beliefs. It enables students to look at how they are doing things by questioning the usefulness of the tasks and thinking ahead for the next step of action to ensure that learning is taking place. Through their journal entries, it was evident that transformative learning was taking place for Aoi and Mika.

The practice of critical reflection has always been a part of what I do as a teacher. I found it insightful and encouraging to be able to use this type of practice with my students and see how their language learning could also be transformed, as was my teaching too. Encouraging language learners to develop critical reflective practices beyond the classroom fosters greater self-awareness by challenging them to question their learning beliefs, draw conclusions about their learning, and finally decide on actions that will transform their learning experiences.

Author Bio

Ann Flanagan has been teaching at Ritsumeikan Junior and Senior High School for the past 24 years. She has an MA in TESOL from the School for International Training (SIT, Brattleboro, Vermont, USA). Her research interests include learner development, extensive reading, international education, teacher training, and curriculum development.

Review Process

This paper was open-reviewed by Hugh Nicoll and Stacey Vye of the *Learner Development Journal* Review Network and by the Journal Steering Group. (Contributors have the option of open or blind review.)

References

- Boud, D., Cohen, R., & Sampson, J. (1999). Peer learning and assessment. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 24(4), 413–426. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0260293990240405>
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the reflective thinking to the educative process*. Heath & Co.
- Dörnyei, Z. (1994). Motivation and motivating in the foreign language classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 78(3), 273–284. <https://doi.org/10.2307/330107>
- Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511667343>
- Farrell, T. S. (2013). Reflecting on ESL teacher expertise: A case study. *System*, 41(4), 1070–1082. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2013.10.014>
- Fook, J. (2011). Developing critical reflection as a research method. In J. Higgs, A. Titchen, D. Horsfall, & D. Bridges (Eds.), *Creative spaces for qualitative researching* (pp. 55–64). Sense Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6091-761-5_6
- Gall, J. P., Gall, M. D., & Borg, W. R. (2005). *Applying educational research: A practical guide*. Pearson Education.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall.
- Mezirow, J. (1990). *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: A guide to transformative and emancipatory learning*. Jossey-Bass.
- Nunan, D. (1991). *Language teaching methodology: A textbook for teachers*. Prentice-Hall.
- Nunan, D., & Richards, J. C. (2015). *Language learning beyond the classroom*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315883472>
- OfficeArrow.com. (2008). *SMART goal worksheet* [Online worksheet]. https://inside.sou.edu/assets/socsci/Advising_Student_Success/Goal_Setting/ica.SMARTGoalWorksheet.pdf
- O’Neill, J., Conzemius, A., Commodore, C., & Pulsfus, C. (2006). *The power of smart goals: Using goals to improve student learning*. Solution Tree Press.
- Richards, J. C. (2015). The changing face of language learning: Learning beyond the classroom. *RELC Journal*, 46(1), 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688214561621>
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.

Appendix A

SMART Goal Worksheet

Today's Date: _____ Target Date: _____ Start Date: _____

Date Achieved: _____

Goal: _____

Verify that your goal is SMART

Specific: *What exactly will you accomplish?*

Measurable: *How will you know when you have reached this goal?*

Achievable: *Is achieving this goal realistic with effort and commitment? Have you got the resources to achieve this goal? If not, how will you get them?*

Relevant: *Why is this goal significant to your life?*

Timely: *When will you achieve this goal?*

This goal is important because:

The benefits of achieving this goal will be:

Take Action!

Potential Obstacles

Potential Solutions

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Who are the people you will ask to help you?

Specific Action Steps: *What steps need to be taken to get you to your goal?*

What?	Expected Completion Date	Completed
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Note. Adapted from https://inside.sou.edu/assets/socsci/Advising__Student_Success/Goal_Setting/ica.SMARTGoalWorksheet.pdf

Appendix B

Questionnaire on Personal Goals for Research Project

- 1) Choose your name
- 2) Age
- 3) At what age did you start learning English? (何歳から英語を学び始めましたか。)
- 4) Are you taking or not taking English lessons outside of school now? (今学校以外で英語のレッスンを受けていますか。)
- 5) If you answered, "yes" to question #4. How many days a week do you study English and for how long? For example: once a week for 3 hours. (質問4で「はい」と答えた方へ。週に何日、どのくらいの時間、英語を勉強していますか？ 例：週に1回、3時間。)
- 6) EIKEN LEVEL (英検級)
- 7) TOEFL ITP SCORE (TOEFL ITPスコア)
- 8) What skill or skills do you want to focus on this year? (今年重点的に取り組みたい英語スキルは何ですか。)
 - a. Listening
 - b. Reading
 - c. Speaking
 - d. Vocabulary
 - e. Writing
 - f. TOEFL ITP
 - g. EIKEN
 - h. TOEFL CBT/iBT
 - i. Other
- 9) If you have a specific area that you would like to work on, write it below. (Ex: Debate or Conversation) (具体的に取り組んでみたい分野があれば、下に書いてください。例：ディベートまたは英語会話)
- 10) What strategies are you using to learn English now? (Ex. Listening to music.) (今はどんな戦略で英語を学んでいますか。例：音楽を聞く。)
- 11) What strategies did you use to learn English, but did not work? (Ex. Listen to music.) (英語を学ぶためにどのような戦略をとったが、うまくいかなかったのか。例：音楽を聞く。)
- 12) What goal(s) would you like to achieve this year? (今年は何ような目標を達成したいですか。)

Appendix C

New Reflection Questions

Before the task

- What would I like to learn today?
- How can I break this task down into manageable parts, so I don't get distracted?
- How long am I going to work on my goal today? Why?
- What are my goals for today?
- What's my energy level? How am I feeling about doing today's goal?

During the task

- What have I learned so far?
- What else do I need to do to finish today's goal?
- Which parts of today's goal are easy for me? difficult for me?
- Does my work reflect my effort thus far?

After the task

- What new information have I learned from today's goal?
- What surprised me about what I learned?
- Where were the roadblocks?
- How did I move through the roadblocks or challenges?
- Does my work reflect my effort thus far?
- Am I proud of my work?

Future

- If given the opportunity, one thing I would change about this task is
- How does what I did today compare with previous tasks?
- Have I achieved the goal I set for myself for today's task? How do I know it?
- Are the goals I set before this task still reasonable? Do I need to adjust them?
- How close am I to achieving my overall original goal?
- In what ways have you gotten better?
- What resources did you use to achieve today's goal? Which ones were particularly helpful? Which ones would you use again?