On the Role of Reflection in Developing Autonomous Diary Writing among Iranian EFL Higher Education Learners

Samad Mirzasuzani, PhD Student[*]
Department of Foreign languages
Shiraz Branch, Islamic Azad University

Mortaza Yamini, PhD
Department of language and Linguistics
Shiraz University

In this study it was aimed to investigate the outcomes of students' reflection on their learning in the context of an out-of-class learning project via diary writing skill. To this end, 42 freshmen following a compulsory General English Language course at Imam Khomeini Maritime University of Noshahr participated in the study. As part of this project, participants were encouraged to fill in "record-of-work" forms, including a space for reflection on learning activities, to be ultimately submitted in a portfolio. They were allowed to write diaries in their own time, reviewing previous works before making new ones. Their comments on diaries were also collected. Next, they were asked to take part in a semi-structured interview. The data were then combined together. In analyzing the data, an approach was used based on "grounded theory" in which it was aimed to generate theory through the systematic review and categorization of data and then categorization and their relationships were elaborated in the process of interpretation. The results maintained that reflection activities could keep the totality of language and involve students both cognitively and emotionally. The activities introduced present Iranian EFL teachers a chance to provide learners with immediate feedback and lead them towards reflective practice and autonomous learning in educational settings.

Keywords: autonomy, critical thinking, feedback, reflection, semi-structured interview, writing diaries

Up to the present, a number of researchers have described reflection as a key psychological component of autonomy. Moon (2004) described reflection as an evolving capacity within individuals, which can best

---

[*] Email: smirzasuzani@yahoo.com

capture the experience and practice in educational settings, and Little (1997) claimed that conscious reflection on the learning process is a distinctive characteristic of autonomous learning. A point to consider, however, is that although reflection can be seen as a key internal mechanism for the development of control over learning language skills, it seems that very little is known about what language learners reflect upon and how they go about doing it.

Leung and Kember (2003) identified the nature of reflection and its relationship to deep-learning. Moreover, as King (1995:16) argued the relationship between externalization of reflection and promoting autonomy seems to lie in the cognitive and behavioral processes by which individuals involve the conscious, planned, informed, deliberate control of *how* and *what* to think in order to maximize progress and minimize error. In the same vein, Brown (1993), quoting Pennycook, reminds teachers of their mission to empower learners, to get them intrinsically involved in their own learning of English as a second or foreign language so as to gain a measure of control over their own learning experiences.

In view of the complexity of the concept of reflective learning, a great deal remains to be learned about the nature of reflection on language learning and its relationship to autonomy in our higher educational system. Moreover, the nature of reflection and out-of-class learning and its relationship to classroom learning seems to be a relatively new area of research within the field of autonomy, in which there is much to be learned. Taking control over the content of learning is, in turn, one of the least-researched areas in the field of autonomy that calls for further investigation.

Considering the issues mentioned above, the central concern of the present study is to investigate the impact of reflective practice on developing autonomy via writing diaries among Iranian EFL learners at higher education level and to scrutinize the purposes of learning from the Iranian EFL learner's point of view at particular stages of the learning process.

Concepts of Reflection and Reflective Practice

The word 'reflection' is crucial in pedagogy, as it might impact on both instructors' teaching and students' learning processes. *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*- 11th edition (2004) defines "reflection" as a thought, idea, or opinion formed or a remark made as a result of meditation. Boud,, Keough, and Walker (1985) defined reflection as a "generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to a new understanding and appreciation", while Louden (1991) defined it more broadly as "a mental process which takes place out of the stream of action, looking forward or (usually) back to actions that have taken place. In terms of autonomous context, reflection can be considered as an important component of language learning at a number of levels: at the level of *language*, at the level of the *learning process*, and as a means of *hypothesis formation*.

Little (1997) recognizes conscious reflection on the learning process as a distinctive characteristic of autonomous learning. Furthermore, he observes that the development of autonomy in language learning aims both "to enable learners to maximize their potential for learning via critical reflection and self-evaluation and to enable them to become independent and self-reliant users of their target language" (pp. 98-9).

Based on Candy (1991), an autonomous learner should characteristically have the following features:

- be methodical and disciplined; logical and analytical; reflective and self-aware;
- demonstrate curiosity, openness and motivation;
- be flexible and self-sufficient; interdependent and interpersonally competent;
- be persistent and responsible; venturesome and creative;
- have developed information seeking and retrieval skills;
- have knowledge about, and skill at, learning processes;
- show confidence and develop and use criteria for evaluating. (Candy,

1991)

Based on Smyth (1991), reflection implies action, and the process of reflection is represented as a series of moments and questions to describe, inform, confront, and reconstruct. Moreover, he argues that on the basis of research, reflection is considered to be:

- A retrospective, introspective or prospective mental process involving rational thought emotion and judgment.

- Consciously initiated by the reflector, by others, or by a disturbance in the normal pattern of feelings or events, leading or not leading to a deep change in the learner.

- Context-bound and goal-oriented.

- Modeled as a cyclical process involving the deconstruction and reconstruction of assumptions or beliefs.

The phrase 'reflective practice', in the same vein, foregrounds the importance of the role of the teachers as practitioners in any higher educational system, affecting the quality of the learning experience of their students.

Reflection has also been conceptualized as one phase within cyclical processes of learning in which it plays a crucial role. Kohonen's (1992) experiential language-learning model describes a cycle of learning involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation leading to further reflection on experience.

Scholars have exemplified a variety of different facets of reflective practice but common to all could be sense of evolution and development. Moon (2004) describes reflection as *an evolving capacity within individuals*, which can best capture the experience and practice in educational settings. On the other hand, Dewey (1993) alleges that reflective thinking is caused by some difficulty, uncertainty or doubt. He points out that real reflective thinking is hard and uncomfortable:

"Reflective thinking is always more or less troublesome

because it involves overcoming the inertia that inclines

one to accept suggestions at their face value; it involves
willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest."
(Dewey, 1993:13)

Brockbank and McGill (1998) take up these ideas and apply them to the
higher education context for three main reasons as follow:
1. Reflective practice enables the teacher to learn from and therefore
potentially enhance their practice and learning about their practice.
2. It enables the teacher to come to an understanding of the reflective
process and so be able to make it accessible to students through modeling
it.
3. Making reflective practice accessible to students enables them to
become aware of the power of reflection in and on their own learning
approaches (i.e., meta-learning).

Besides, Brockbank and McGill argue that reflective practice is not a
'bolt-on' activity but should be the core element of a teacher's work. We
could even go further that reflective practice linked to continuing
professional development is one of the hallmarks of professionalism, and
this is in line with the view of many theorists and practitioners who work
in higher education.

Development of Reflection among Iranian EFL Learners

For the time being, one of the predominant concerns for most Iranian
EFL students in our higher education system is to learn how to do
academic writing, while EFL teachers' main concern is mostly to establish
a common understanding of reflection-on-practice. It is believed that a
capacity for reflection is central to learning, so that involvement of
students in reflection about their professional practice and their academic
development underpins program learning and teaching processes. Hence,
EFL students in our higher education institutions need to understand the
profound nature of reflection and its relationship to deep-learning.

Project

Due to the consecutive reports and widely-frequent observations made by many Iranian EFL colleagues, the main incentive for the present study came from the rule-of-thumb assumption that Iranian EFL students, coming from an educational system wherein examination pressure encourages memorization and rote-learning, most often seem weak in language learning strategies (LLS) such as metacognitive awareness and critical thinking skills. The present study, therefore, aimed to investigate the outcomes of the students' reflection upon their learning when they were positioned in the context of an out-of-class learning project through writing skill.

Background of the Study

The origin of critical reflection may date back to well over two thousand years ago when it was believed that things very often are not what they seem on the surface (Lotfi, 2006). Concern with the importance of reflection in learning dates back at least as far as Dewey (1993), whose definition of reflection has been widely quoted:

> "... Active persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it. It includes a conscious and voluntary effort to establish belief upon a firm basis of evidence and rationality." (Dewey, 1993: 9)

Nunan (1994) investigated what happened when a group of 30 undergraduate EAP students were encouraged to self-monitor and self-evaluate using guided learning journals. He observed that opportunities to reflect led to greater sensitivity to the learning process over time.

Hanley (1995) maintained critical thinking derives from both cognitive and Metacognitive processes. The cognitive skills operate with information and data, which are isolated, then encoded, integrated, organized, transformed, stored and retrieved. Metacognitive skills, on the other hand, are used in monitoring and controlling mental processes and

23

the various states of knowledge.

Case and Gunstone (2002), in their investigation of some South African students reported that meta-cognition operates on three levels. The most basic level is information-based, where the students focus on understanding some facts which might be useful for subsequent assessment; the next level is algorithmic, where the students attempt to incorporate methods for solving relevant problems; and the top level is conceptual, "where the learners' intention is to understand concepts" (P. 465).

Any consideration of reflective practice must also acknowledge the seminal work of Schön (1983, 1987). Schön's basic premise was a distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Schön believed that *refection-in-action* occurs when the practitioner, in our case the university educator, is teaching and something unplanned for occurs. In this situation the teacher will reflect and take some action but this will bear very little relation to her/his espoused theory. *Reflection-on-action* is the type of reflection that occurs after the action and may well involve espoused theory. There have been many criticisms of the rather fuzzy distinction made by Schön, but what he has done is to make clear how professionals enhance their practice while they are engaging in it.

Aims and Objectives

The main aim of the study was to describe the process of reflection among Iranian students of General English course who were asked to reflect upon their out-of-class learning, using the writing skills and personal experiences. The study focused on two main research questions:

- What kinds of things do Iranian EFL students reflect upon?

- To what extent could their writing essays and diaries be described as reflective?

The study was essentially descriptive, aiming to answer "what" questions rather than "how" or "why" questions. The outcome of the research was intended to be a set of descriptive categories that would

allow a better understanding of the process of reflection among Iranian EFL students of General English course in the present study.

Method

The participants of the study were 42 first-year students following a compulsory General English Language Course at Imam Khomeini Maritime University of Noshahr, including an assessed out-of-class learning project. As part of this project, students were encouraged to fill in "record-of-work" forms, which included a space for reflection on learning activities, to be submitted in a portfolio at the end of the project (Appendix I). In this way, the students were allowed to write their diaries in their own time and to review previous works before making new ones. It also allowed the researcher to collect data in an easily accessible form at the end. To gain more data that might be missing in the "record-of-work" forms, a semi-structured interview was conducted (Appendix II). Semi-structured interview is commonly used to make up for the limitations of questionnaires (Brown and Dowling, 1999). The interviewees were briefed about the purpose of the interview, and the interview was conducted in a semi-structured format so that the participants were not restricted within the confines of the interviewer's questions and could openly discuss the writing strategies they employed. The final data consisted of a combination of writing tasks from different students who did one or two more diary writing and wrote their comments on their own diaries, and a collection of participants' semi-structured interviews.

In this study, the students' diaries were approached as direct evidence of the learners' ability to reflect upon their learning experiences and qualitative data were used as a source of direct evidence. In other words, the learners' reflection on written texts was used as a source of direct evidence of their ability to reflect on their learning. Such data were used as direct evidence of learners' reflection. The data from learners' diaries were then combined with data gathered through semi-structured interviews with the participants. In analyzing the data, an approach was employed based

25

on the "grounded theory" developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The grounded theory method, as Given (2008) argues, consists of a set of systematic, but flexible, guidelines for conducting inductive qualitative inquiry aimed toward theory construction. In this method, the focus is squarely on the analytic phases of research, although both data collection and analysis inform and shape each other and are conducted in tandem. Moreover, the analytic strategies are inherently comparative and interactive; therefore, this method guides researchers to make systematic comparisons and to engage the data and emerging theory actively throughout the research process (Given, 2008).

Based on the features of the grounded theory, in the present study it was primarily aimed to generate theory via the systematic review and classification of data collected, and then it was attempted to elaborate on data categorization via their relationships in the process of interpretation.

Data Collection

The data for the present study were collected from two main sources:

I. Students' individual diaries plus their "record-of-work" forms, used as reflection on learning activities at the General English Course, submitted in a portfolio at the end of the project.

II. Conducting semi-structured interviews with the participants;

Students' "Record-of-Work" Forms and Individual Diary Writing

In some part of their "record-of-work" forms used at the General English course at university level, students were supposed to reflect on their diaries and then comment on how useful and enjoyable their activities were. Also they were asked to point out if there were any special problems to the process of writing diaries.

Data collected via students' end-of-project "record-of-work" forms revealed some interesting points, proportionate to the individuals' diverse background knowledge and varying language abilities. In any case, the learners' comments on their diaries most often had positively to do with an

increase in individual learners' language ability and development of metacognitive awareness among them. In Table 1 the comments of some participants on the development of metacognitive awareness over the study are illustrated.

Table 1

The Development of Metacognitive Awareness in Some Participants

Language Ability	Participant's Comments	Areas of Metacognitive Awareness Demonstrated
Very High	*I totally agree the use of learner diary. It's a self-reflection and you can see how much we have learnt and we can tell you our problem and suggestion on studying English.*	Learning process, Social, Subject matter
High	*I think diary writing is a communication between teacher and learners. When I see back the learner diary, it helps to remind me the goal I've set before. But maybe it's not necessary to all the classmates. Many Iranian students don't have experience in it. I think it need not be a compulsory work for all learners.*	Learning process, Social
Medium-high	*To evaluate the learning process and know more about the lesson and the program were taught [sic]. Diary writing is helpful, because through the diary, I can know many common problems [sic] and what is my barrier in English: but the solution is not clear, so it is hard for me to improve.*	Learning process, Learner, Subject matter

Medium	*It reminds me many common problems I've never resolved. It reminds me I have to face them. And I've never reflected my English learning before I enter this class. It much help me to know my weakness in English.*	Learner awareness, Subject awareness
Medium-low	*When I am writing the diary, I think it is so boring. But now, I watch it. The feeling is good. Because I know what I've learnt and I can see that I improve in English.*	Learning process, Learner
Low	*It is useful a little bit. Every time I do the learner diary; I really think it is no use. But when you pass the diary back to me, I find that I interest to learn English in some way, such as watch movie, comics, etc.[sic]*	Learner awareness

In addition to the learners' comments on the effect of diary writing on the learners' language ability and development of individuals' metacognitive awareness, the occurrence of erroneous forms in the diaries of Individual learners' is a matter of importance to mention. It is valuable in that it could uncover some interesting points about highly-frequent errors in the productive writing, and hence give some principal clues to inhibit and hold back major obstacles in the development of autonomous writing.

Data on errors were obtained from participants' individual diaries in the present study. However, in a larger scope, they could represent commonly fundamental problems of most Iranian learners' in the process of any autonomous writing. A wide-ranging classification of participants' diverse errors in writing autonomous diaries together with some sample errors is illustrated in Appendix III.

Semi-structured Interviews

Data collected via semi-structured interviews revealed some interesting points regarding participants' current problems in writing skills. Further, they provided us in more details with learners' strategies in wring diaries. Some of the most important strategies revealed were as follow:

Metacognitive Strategies

As for metacognitive strategies, students asserted that they had conducted little writing in their free time before, and that they had problems writing in particular text genres. They referred to many factors including lack of time, difficulty, and traditional course requirements as main reasons, "Writing in English in my free time has been both time-consuming and laborious for me." Likewise, they asserted, "We were not actually required to write much beyond the writing exercises in our books at high school or pre-university classrooms."

An interesting point mentioned by most of the participants (about 60 percent) was that they found writing narratives or descriptions (like diaries) less demanding than writing argumentative texts, "Planning an argumentative essay takes me a lot of time and energy thinking of different things. You know you need to think and take sides." Also, they claimed "…it's more convenient for me to write about my experiences or describe my town, my life or an event. Then, I know more words and can write more…."

Memory Strategies

Data concerning memory strategies showed that Iranian undergraduates are not very familiar with or do not use mnemonic devices to improve their knowledge of language skills including writing skills. Moreover, they do not revise and contextualize novel vocabulary items or grammatical structures in their writing. These findings were further corroborated through the interviews with participants of study. More than a half of

interviewees declared that "I sometimes write down some new words I think helpful in writing on flashcards but it is so hard to remember and use them while writing because of the enormity of the new expressions." Others pursued "I come across many new words and structures every week. So I almost always forget to use them while writing and thus get frustrated at times. Interviews with further students also highlighted this point, "We really do not have enough time to review new words or syntactic structures we come across, especially new structures which are different from Persian are kind of hard to remember and use while writing… so we just use them infrequently." Also some other students admitted, "Well, I almost give up using some new syntactic structures in my essays since they often turn out to be wrongly used….Actually, I try to avoid using them or use them only when I'm absolutely certain about them."

Compensation Strategies

Compensation strategies are revealing especially with respect to coining and avoidance strategies. The results of the interviews with participants revealed that more than a half of the students were inclined towards coining new phrases or expressions in cases when they did not remember the intended language forms. This was in contrast with the behavior of the lower level participants. They did not risk coining or rephrasing their intended meaning when their linguistic knowledge fell short. Instead they resorted to sort of copying the original form of the (familiar) words or expressions. It was admitted by many of the lower level students as in, "I use only the words I know…and mainly try to write the language forms I've learned."Also, "I try to use a synonym or simple writing if I do not remember a particular form, but most of the time I'm not so sure if they are the right words."Likewise," I feel at loss writing about things I'm not interested in or things abstract to me. Thus, I almost always avoid writing about them."

Most of the English learners attending General English Courses in the

Iranian higher education institutions fall into the same category as lower level participants of the study. Writing on unfamiliar topics seems to hinder the developmental writing performance of these writers. Their writing performance also suffers largely as a result of the unfamiliar tasks, which reduces the learners' confidence and raises their anxiety, thus lowering their performance. As Horwitz (2000) found highly anxious students make fewer attempts to convey difficult messages in the target language, and it raises their anxiety, reduces their confidence, and eventually lowers their performance.

A compensatory strategy employed by students in the present study was neat writing. Almost all of the interviewees mentioned neat writing as one of the most important qualities in their writing, "…My teacher and peers enjoy my neat writing, and tell me they like that."Also, "To tell you the truth, I believe one of the good things which get me some extra marks is my neat and tidy paragraph writing. Some of my friends think it is not worth the trouble, but I don't think so."

Some cognitive strategies highlighted in the interviews related to translation and outlining. With regard to translation from Persian into English, some differences were found between learners. Less experienced learners tended to use more translation, especially when planning or outlining before writing, "Preparing the outline in Persian to write from helps to write with less chaos." Likewise, "…I'll write some ideas in Persian on a piece of paper and try to include those points as I write in English."

On the other hand, some other learners preferred to produce an outline or plan in English and to develop their ideas from that outline rather than starting from the mother tongue. This group typically included more advanced students. Responses from the interviews with this group were the following: "I design a rough outline in English first and build up on that. This is great especially while taking a writing exam." And, "Thinking in English helps me let my writing flow in English….also I draw a quick English outline on top of my paper."

The use of these strategies support the point that both planning and translation using the learner's first language may be helpful writing strategies related to individual and academic experience (Cohen and Brooks-Carson, 2001).

Affective Strategies

Interviews showed that after a few weeks from the beginning of the project most learners preferred a stronger tendency for further writing. Their confidence in language skills and their interest in writing tasks increased. They believed that written communication could be more conducive to a better performance. They also declared they enjoyed written communication more than they did at the beginning of the course, "I can gather up my energy really more strongly when I am writing at home in my study."Also, it was argued "Now I encourage myself to send all my emails in English, and this is fantastic. I like that."Likewise some other said, "Before this, I really felt fear toward writing even one sentence in English. Now I feel more at ease with it."

Social Strategies

As for social strategies, almost all of the interviewees emphasized that the feedback they got from their teachers and peers was the most valuable to them, "My friend's English is great, and so I ask him to correct my errors in writing."

Another point raised by many learners about the teacher's feedback, especially at the beginning of the project, was that they had a hard time to figure out the teacher's intended written feedback given in the form of ticks, marks, crosses, etc., "…the teacher just ticks off the end of my paper, or sometimes he writes 'Good', or 'excellent' at the bottom. I get pleased. But, to tell the truth, I don't get much out of it… I myself know there are still some wrong points there." Also, it was claimed "The 'crosses' and the 'question' marks make me confused. I go to great pains to understand what they mean all over my text."

Williams and Burden (1997) believe that the teacher's written feedback needs to be informational rather than just simple and potentially confusing marks, i.e. it should increase students' motivation towards certain aspects of the writing task and help them perform subsequent tasks with greater independence and confidence. The reason is that teachers' written feedback has a mediatory function and will be considered helpful by the learner only when it generates a feeling of competence, confidence, individuality, and control. Moreover, the feedback, given in any form, should identify to learners which aspects of their writing are acceptable and which aspects are capable of improvement, and thus help them develop towards the next stage or level of writing development.

Finally, some participants in the study emphasized the role of cultural understanding as an instrumental tool for writing development, "I think cultural understanding of a foreign language can help me write more native-like."

The interface between reading and writing and how reading about a foreign culture can foster writing in that language is highlighted here. Accordingly, foreign language readers can keep a journal or a portfolio of their readings whereby they can master some helpful and/or intractable features (cultural, grammatical, etc.) of the foreign language for their writing practices.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the data, an approach based on the "grounded theory" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was employed. In this method the focus is directly on the analytic phases of research, although both data collection and analysis would inform and shape each other in cycle (Given, 2008). It was assumed that interpreting the data collected through writing diaries and semi-structured interviews would provide us with valuable results concerning learners' process of autonomous learning. Likewise, it could be demonstrated how external obstacles to independent learning (e.g., lack of time, care, attention, etc.) may turn into external obstacles (the learners'

lack of motivation and problems with time management, puzzlement, confusion, etc.) in the course of reflection. Consequently, it could clarify how teachers should attempt to minimize the negative impact of learning obstacles on the process of their learners' independent learning.

Result

A partial analysis of the data collected in the present study revealed that the current Iranian universities' formal context for teaching General English at the undergraduate level does not essentially promote a free-writing culture among the students. Nor are the students encouraged to develop journals or keep diaries and share their writing with their peers. Based on Mirza Suzani and Yamini (2011), the large number of students in a class and the instructors' time constraints and heavy teaching loads could make the matter worse. Moreover, based on the researchers' instructional experience, the traditional milieu of learning in the Iranian educational settings is set more on an oral culture than a written culture (Mirza Suzani, 2007). The students are not trained adequately from early grades to do much writing, and in most General English classes students get used to passively listening to lectures on reading selections and doing simple end-of-chapter exercises (Abdollahzadeh, 2010). This practice, though convenient for students, surely does not result in rewarding learning in general, nor does it lead to creative writing in particular.

In spite of all ever-present drawbacks, the research findings from the students' diaries and semi-structured interviews in the study could be promising on the other scale, as participants revealed a great satisfaction with the writing tasks used. In terms of *variety* students' reports for their diary writing revealed that the writing tasks created variety for students and were helpful in their learning. As Willis (1996) suggests, students feel the need for various interaction patterns that focus on themselves rather than on the teacher. Diary writing is capable of fulfilling such needs wherein for almost every writing task students have valuable comments reflecting their satisfaction from the tasks used. Willis (1996) also points

out that, carefully chosen tasks make learners participate in complete interactions and this raises motivation.

Throughout the study, there were some tasks about guessing unfamiliar vocabulary. Although those tasks were occasionally not intended directly in the research, students' diaries helped to realize the value of such tasks used. Furthermore, the findings emerging from the study of the diaries showed that their impact on the students' (later) oral presentations turned out to be highly motivating, so that in many cases the amount of students' talking time in class showed a great increase. In the same vein, the findings of the students' diaries showed that writing tasks encouraged students' improved performance, so that all the participants gave positive feedback on the tasks used in class and although students were not occasionally directed to focus on tasks in diaries, they preferred to write further about the tasks and their satisfaction for having active language lessons augmented considerably. As Willis (1996) points out, "in order to complete the goals in tasks, students react to the content and process the text for meaning" (p.30), and Lightbown and Spada (1993) mention, some learners feel the need to add physical action to their learning processes to experience the new knowledge in ways that involve them better with the tasks.

The findings of the diary studies in terms of *learning* could also be noteworthy, as they indicated that writing tasks have been beneficial for vocabulary learning. Vocabulary learned via reading an authentic text, and then writing it could become more effective and permanent. In many cases, even participants' oral presentations following diary writing could contribute significantly to students' learning. During these presentations, they were not only improving their spoken English but their knowledge of social topics and relevant vocabulary as well. It was the reason students noted they were highly satisfied with this communication task in the classroom. As has been argued by Lightbown and Spada (1993), communicative need is a factor that defines motivation in second or foreign language.

Addressing the question of *reflectivity* and what the learners reflected upon, the following main categories were identified as key factors or main objects of reflection:

- Learning events or situations;
- The learner's role in the learning process;
- The learner's feelings about learning and learning events;
- Difficulties encountered in the process of learning;
- Earning gains;
- Decisions and plans.

In this regard, the observation and interpretation of learners' diaries showed interesting results. The students' reflections, for the most part, did not lead to more systematic plans or changes in plan. In many cases, learners recorded positive feelings about autonomous activities, and took these feelings as a reason to continue with the same kinds of activities. In rarer case, learners reported feelings of discomfort that caused them to produce a longer writing in which an experience was re-evaluated and re-framed.

Addressing the question of degrees of reflectivity, it was observed that the written works were often short and there was little sense of continuity across the tasks. In most cases, each writing task covered a distinct event or topic and there was little reference to earlier tasks. Based on the above discussion, therefore, two dimensions of reflectivity could be considered: integration and transformation. A sequence of writing tasks was integrated if it could bring together the different domains of context, affect and cognition, and explore relationship between them. Reflection, on the other hand, could be considered transformative if it could display evidence that the learner was reworking experiences, considering alternatives and changing his/her perception of experiences.

Fostering EFL Learners' Reflective Academic Writing

For the most part, Iranian students at college level require support to develop confidence in their reflective writing (Abdollahzadeh, 2010). In

particular, they show concern about their ability to use other sources such as their own experiences, relevant documents and academic texts. The majority of students in our colleges have a weak understanding of reflection-on-practice and the nature of reflective writing (Mirza Suzani, 2007). They often lack confidence in their writing capability and struggle with referencing conventions. Some have weak grammar, incompetent spelling and unskilled punctuation in addition to weaknesses in structural elements. In addition, as Nightingale (1988) argues many students, in general, tend to focus on product rather than process when writing, which is a common behavior among almost all learner throughout the world.

Bolton (2001) argued that writing is an explorative process that is considered a vehicle for reflection (p.135), and Crème and Lea's (1998) asserted that the perception which all academic writing is depersonalized does not help students, and supported the challenge of such conventions as avoiding the use of the first-person 'I'.

Bold *et al.* (2006) in their research identified lack of confidence as a reason for lack of reflective writing on behalf of learners, but asserted that another reason might be the inhibitive nature of summative assessments obstructing reflection in writing. Hence, in their opinion, engaging students in critical review and reflection on each other's experiences establishes a community of enquiry. In this case, the challenge would be to engage students in reflection-on-practice in any practical activity including studying, while developing the ability to evidence this in writing.

Some Suggestions

To develop reflective writing in our higher educational settings, teachers should avoid a rigid focus on academic writing conventions alone, since it is not unlikely that such a focus be detrimental to the development of reflective writing. In addition, teachers ought to actively encourage students to write from their own experiences where appropriate and to make use of personal reference when required, since many students might express reflective thoughts orally, but not necessarily within their

assessed writing. Moreover, the teachers should advocate working on many short pieces of writing in which students express their own opinions, values and beliefs with some conviction and evidence.

Our students, on the other hand, should develop their writing skills in supported activities over a period which could result in varying degrees of reflection exhibited in portfolio tasks. Likewise, they should share their writing tasks and make critical comments on the content and style of their writing. Students could also learn to write best in the *context* of their studies, as suggested by Hurley (2005) and Nightingale (1988). Likewise, they should be encouraged to draw on their previous experiences as writers and thus build upon current skill level. The integration of study skills with the content of the program also provides contextual relevance for the learning of such skills. In the same way, a range of learning experiences could be conducted to support students' writing development, some of which are as follow:
- Reading and reflection activities;
- Tutors' modeling writing and referencing skills;
- Focused writing tasks, e.g., to reflect on and refer to a set reading;
- Paired sharing and evaluating writing;
- Tutor-led editing activities.

Such activities are formative and set within the context of writing reflectively on short tasks and can occur in any subject discipline. Undertaking several short writing tasks requires tutors to provide clear feedback in support of the students' development as writers. Feedback might be individual, e.g., modeling a reflective style on a submitted formative piece, or to whole cohorts of students, e.g., summarizing common issues arising within the tasks and discussing ways to improve.

The key to quality feedback is to be specific rather than general and to support it with practical examples. That was why the focus for our first-year students was the production of a portfolio of reflective practice based on the students' experiences. In other subject disciplines that do not have work-related elements, there is potential for early development of critical

reflection-on-practice in keeping learning logs, regular oral and written critiques of news articles and recent topical papers. Students should have early opportunity in the academic experience to reflect on their learning practices and the practices of others in the wider local, national and international communities.

Conclusion

In this study it was discovered that Iranian EFL students in General English classroom found the process of reflection in writing diaries rather thorny and intricate, especially in the initial steps. They were often unsure what they should write and looked for guidance. Occasionally, they fumbled for unknown vocabulary or piece of information. Some exceptional cases of deeper reflection were due to the learners' experiences that challenged their perception of language learning. Therefore, it seems that encouraging students to reflect more deeply on their learning does not necessarily imply training learners in strategies for reflection. Rather, teachers should aim to provide students with challenging experiences that provoke deeper reflection. Teachers should also provide learners with opportunities to discuss the processes of learning that arise from their experiences and reflection. Devices such as diaries and reflection sessions can be artifacts of research that allow the teachers to observe the outcomes of reflection. At the same time, it is most likely that externalization of thought in writing (or in speech) could facilitate reflection by allowing learners to express themselves via their thoughts and their experiences.

Over the study, it was also realized that underlying the students' writing capability were issues of confidence, levels of engagement and acceptance of responsibility as prerequisites to becoming independent learners in higher education. In order to prop up all students' understanding of the nature of reflection-on-practice, teachers could develop resources on Ghaye and Ghaye's (1998) ten principles of reflective practice, based on which reflection-on-practice engages participants in the following activities:

- Reflective conversations that have the potential to disturb their professional identity;

- Interrogation of experiences;

- Returning to look at taken-for-granted values, professional values and understandings 'a reflective turn';

- Describing, explaining and justifying practices;

- Viewing professional situations 'problematically';

- Creating knowledge of interest to self and others;

- Asking probing and challenging questions;

- Decoding a symbolic landscape, e.g. the 'school culture';

- Linking theory and practice as a creative process;

- Socially constructing 'ways of knowing'.

(Ghaye and Ghaye 1988: 15-19)

It seems self-evident that not all students are consistent in their approach to learning, and there are a range of factors such as maturity, previous learning experiences, academic qualifications, workplace experience and commitment which may influence learners' engagement. Each factor has the potential to impact on successful engagement and retention. Through reflective activities within the program, it is aimed to enhance the quality of learning and teaching for students via increased levels of peer and tutor support and providing varied contexts for learning. In fact, developing student capability to reflect on practice within their work-based degree programs could be a fundamental requirement before focusing their thoughts on the contributions of other practical and theoretical perspectives.

In this study, it was illustrated that becoming reflective could enable our students to accept differing points of view with a higher level of criticality. If first-year students in our higher education institutions have their self-reflective skills developed, our EFL teachers will have a greater chance of engaging them in deeper learning and becoming worthy of honors-level graduate status in the future. In addition, they could become confident practitioners in their chosen field of work and employment.

Based on the above considerations and assuming that there is an integral relationship between reflective teaching and autonomy in learning the following training implications are presented:

- Focus on the learner: curricula and training sessions should be built from personal needs and theories;

- Focus on training processes- particularly on critical reflection and experimentation- and not only on training outcomes;

- Enquire about pedagogical knowledge and practices in order to be able to describe, inform and reconstruct personal theories and action;

- Integrate theory and practice by valuing the role of experience-derived knowledge;

- promote introspective reflection.

The main aim of the above implications is eventually to identify features of practice within the program that support student engagement from the earliest stages. Also it should aim to offer students a starting point in their engagement with learning and to provide a meaningful context for personal reflection. Another important point to mention is that problem-solving, critical reflection and deep-level thinking do not take place in a social vacuum. Bernstein (1995:23) concludes that any theory of problem solving or critical thinking as an aspect of problem solving "must be grounded in a more socially based view of knowledge and cognition". Likewise, Vygotsky (1978) maintained that true learning takes place in that area of intellectual functioning between the actual (current) developmental level (determined by independent problem-solving and thinking), and the level of potential development (determined by cognitive functioning) with guidance from or in collaboration with more capable others.

The result of this study can also contribute significantly to the understanding of the process of reflection among Iranian language learners, in particular in relation to the role of affective factors in learners' thinking about learning. Often, reflection is treated as a matter of intellect. Likewise, the process of planning independent learning activities can be

crucially affected by affect. Reflections upon positive feelings can confirm the learners' sense of the rightness of a plan. Negative feelings about learning experiences can become an occasion for deeper reflection leading to changes in plan.

To put it in a nutshell, a major recommendation of the present study is that EFL instructors in our educational system should be committed to afford writing students greater opportunity for introspection, sharing and communication. Deep-level reflection and critical thinking are vital strategies that might help learners in the acquisition of new EFL writing and language skills. Promoting thinking about one's own process of writing is appropriated, accountable and effective in the EFL context. Similarly, encouraging reflection and teaching thinking skills is an indispensable part and parcel of teaching writing.

References

Abdollahzadeh, E. (2010). Undergraduate Iranian EFL Learners' Use of Writing Strategies. *Writing and Pedagogy*. 2(1), 65-90.

Bernstein, D. A. (1995). A negotiation model for teaching critical thinking. *Teaching of Psychology,* 22 (1), 22-24.

Bold, C., Hutton, P., Norton, B., & Stevenson, R. (2006) Developing confidence and competence in academic writing – An evaluative project, in *Pedagogical Action Research in Maximizing Education* [PRIME] 1 (2).

Bolton, G. (2001). *Reflective practice–Writing and professional development*. London: Paul Chapman.

Boud, D., Keough, R. & Walker, D. (eds) (1985). *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning.* London: Kogan Page.

Brockbank, A. and McGill, I. (1998) *Facilitating reflective learning in higher education.* Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.

Brown, H. D. (1993). TESOL at twenty-five: What are the issues? In Silberstein, S. (ed.) *State of the Art TESOL essays: Celebrating 25 years of the discipline*. Alexandria (Virginia.) (USA): TESOL Inc.

Brown, A. & Dowling, P. (1999) *Doing Research/Reading Research: A Mode of Interrogation for Education*. London: The Falmer Press.

Candy, P. C. (1991). *Self-direction for Lifelong Learning*. San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.

Case, J. & Gunstone, R. (2002). Metacognitive development as a shift in approach to learning: An in-depth study. *Studies in Higher Education,* 27 (4), 459-470.

Cohen, A. D. & Brooks-Carson, A. (2001). Research on directs versus translated writing: Students' strategies and their results. *The Modern Language Journal* 85, 169–188.

Crème, P. & Lea, P. (1998). Student writing: challenging the myths, in *Proceedings of the 5th Annual Writing Development in Higher Education Conference Centre for Applied Language Studies*, University of Reading.

Dewey, J. (1993). *How We Think*. Chicago: Rogney.

Ghaye, A. & Ghaye, K. (1998). *Teaching and learning through critical reflective practice*. London: Routledge.

Given, M. L. (2008). *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. California: SAGE Publications.

Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. M. (1967). *The Discovery of General Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research.* New York: Aldine.

Hanley, G. L. (1995). Teaching critical thinking: Focusing on metacognitive skills and problem solving. *Teaching of Psychology,* 22 (1), 68-71.

Horwitz, E. K. (2000). It ain't over til it's over: On the foreign language anxiety, first language deficits, and the confounding of variables. *The Modern Language Journal* 84, 256–259.

Hurley, U. (2005). 'So wotz ring wiv dat?' The importance of context and creativity in developing students' writing skills. *Pedagogical Research in Maximizing Education*, 1 (1), 61–69.

King, A. (1995). Designing the instructional process to enhance critical thinking across the curriculum. *Teaching of Psychology,* 22 (1), 13-16.

Kohonen, V. (1992). "Experiential language learning: second language learning as cooperative learner education". In D. Nunan (ed.) *Collaborative Language Learning and Teaching*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 14-39.

Leung, D. Y. P., & Kember, D. (2003). The relationship between approaches to learning and reflection upon practice. *Educational Psychology*, 23 (1), 62–71.

Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (1993). *How languages are learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Little, D. (1997). "Language awareness and the autonomous language learner", *Language Awareness*, 6 (2/3): 93-104.

Lotfi, B. (2006). "Incorporating Critical Thinking Activities in Content Areas (ESP/EAP). In G.R. Kiany & M. Khayamdar (eds.) *Proceedings of the First National ESP/EAP Conference*. Volume III. Tehran: SAMT.

Louden, W. (1991). *Understanding Teaching.* London: Cassel. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary.* (2004). 11th Edition. USA: Springfield, Massachusetts. Merriam-Webster Inc.

Mirza Suzani, S. (2007). "Enhancing Language Learning Strategies (LLS) Through Narrowing the Gap between Learning and Instruction". In *The Fourth Conference on Issues in English Language Teaching in Iran (IELTI4).* Tehran: University of Tehran, Faculty of Foreign Languages, English Department.

Mirza Suzani, S. & Yamini, Y. (2011). "Externalization of Reflection and Promoting Autonomy via Writing Diaries among Iranian EFL Higher Education Learners." *In Proceedings of the 9th Asia TEFL Conference. Korea, Seoul.*

Moon, J. A. (2004) *Reflection in learning and professional development.* Theory and practice. London: Routledge Falmer.

Nightingale, P. (1988) Understanding processes and problems in student writing. *Studies in Higher Education*, 13 (3), 263–283.

Nunan, D. (1994). "Self-assessment and reflections as tools for learning".

Paper presented at the Assessment Colloquism, International Language in Education Conference, University of Hong Kong, and December.

Rubin, J. (2003). Diary writing as a process: Simple, useful, powerful. *Guidelines*, *25*(2), 10-14.

Schön, D. A. (1983). The reflective practitioner. New York: Basic Books.

Schön, D. A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner*. Toward a new design for teaching and learning in the professions. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Schön, D. A. (1991). *The reflective practitioner – How professionals think in action*. Aldershot: Arena.

Smyth, J. (1991). *Teachers as Collaborative Learners.* Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* Cole, M., Scribner, S., John-Steiner, V., & Soberman, E. (eds). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Williams, M. & Burden, L. R. (1997). *Psychology for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Willis, J. (1996). *A framework for task-based learning*. Harlow: Longman.

Appendixes

Appendix I: A "record-of-work" form used at the General English Course at University level

Date	Period covered
……………………………..	…………….........….................

What I have done

(Describe activities and write down the titles of any materials you have used)

What I have learned

(Summarize what you think you have learned in a few words)

Reflections

(Comment on how useful and enjoyable your activities were. Any problems?)

Future plans

(Note down next activities and when you will do them. Also note any changes to your goals or plans)

Appendix II: Semi-structured Interview

1. What was your General English course like at the beginning of the semester?

2. Do you think there was a problem with the course in the beginning?

3. What do you think about the number of writing diaries and the type of diaries you were assigned to do?

4. What are some major problems with writing diaries assigned to you?

5. What is the extent to writing diaries helped you to achieve autonomy within the course?

6. What is the extent to which reflection-on-practice helped you to achieve

your success within the course in general?

7. Do you frequently do writing in your free time?

8. How much did you learn from your teacher's emphasis on your writing task?

9. To what extent do you try to use new syntactic structures in your essays?

10. Have you realized any change in your General English course?

11. When did you realize such a change?

12. How did you realize this change?

13. Did you enjoy English lessons in the beginning of the semester more, or English lessons after the middle of the semester? Why?

14. To what extent do you enjoy written communication (e.g., writing diaries)?

15. In writing diaries, do you prefer to use more translation from Persian or produce an outline or plan in English?

16. Do you think you benefited from your teacher more in the beginning of the semester, or after the middle of the semester?

17. Do you think you benefited from your class conducted in oral communication or written communication?

18. How important is the role of reflection in improving your English written skills?

19. How important is the role of reflection in improving your English oral skills?

20. How do you think diaries can affect your knowledge of English in general?

Appendix III: Classification of Participants' Major Errors in Writing Autonomous Diaries

Type of Error	Sample Error(s)
Errors in the Use of Tenses	We **are drinking** tea after lunch every day. We **have gone** on a picnic last week. His parents **had researched** for him last night.
Errors in the Use of Prepositions	I usually begin my work*Æ* the afternoon. I am from **in** Iran. We reached **to/at** school late. We arrived **to** Tehran **in** 1:30 p.m.
Errors in the Use of Articles	I have a class in *Æ* morning. I live in **the** Tehran. My brother is*Æ* teacher in high school. He wanted to get **an** information about diary writing.
Wrong Use of Active and Passive Voice	I **employed** in a factory last month. Ali's father **was died** last year.
Wrong Sequences of Tenses	He said that he **will** come with us to the picnic. I said I **am** very sorry for that happening.
Wrong Word Order	**My country are foods** very expensive.
Errors in the Use of 'it is' instead of 'there is'	**It was** 35 students in our classroom. **It is** a difference between weekends in Iran and Europe.
Misplacement of Adverbs	We went **last summer** to Mazandarn. He **usually** was absent from class.
Wrong use of Negative Constructions	I was bored because I **didn't** have **nothing** to do. I **can't not** to help my parent because they are old.
Errors in the Use of Conditional Sentences	If I was rich I **try** to **get better** my people.
Wrong Use of Negative Imperative in Indirect Speech	My father ordered me **don't** go to the party. Our teacher told us **don't** trouble our parents.
Errors in the Use of Relative Clauses and Relative Pronouns	I tried to cook a delicious food that they liked **it**. I don't like to live in buildings which **they** are crowded. One thing that I always like to do **it** is...
Lack of Subject-verb Inversion in Wh-Questions	When **you will** go to your college? How many brothers **you have**? What the name of the film **was**?

48

Errors in the Wrong Use of subject-verb Inversion in Indirect Questions	*I don't know how **should** I cook my omelette.* *He couldn't remember when **did** his parents **leave** the city.*
Errors in the Distribution and Use of Verb Groups	*Main food in our country **are included** meat,...* *I **enjoy from to be** alone very much.* *All kinds of food in our country **don't equally** cheap.*
Errors Due to Lack of Concord	*My parents **was** born in Tehran.* *There are three clever **student** in our class.*
Wrong Use of the Plural Morpheme	*Teachers give us good **advices**.* *I got a lot of **informations** from my friends.*
Wrong Use of Part of Speech	*It is **naturally** that everybody needs money.* *The people in my country are very **interesting** in football.*
Wrong Use of Quantifiers and Intensifiers	*There isn't **many** traffic in small towns.* *Last night I was **very** tired that I couldn't study.*
Use of Typical Persian Constructions in English	*He **wasn't agreed with** me.* *It **was near that** he started to cry like a baby.* *There is **special nothing** that you can do in that town.* *My brother **has** 40 years.*
Lexico-Semantic Errors	*I am working 24 **o'clocks** each week.* *Iran is my **mother** country.* *The bank in front of my home was **stolen** yesterday.* *My father **learned** me the Koran when I was a child.*
Errors Due to Simplification	*I like **air north of Iran**.* *I am **student English language**.*