

## **Engaging Students in Deeper Reflection: Reflections on Combining Tasks and Reflections**

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### **Author Biographies**

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### Abstract

This reflective paper examines a pedagogical approach developed by two new English Language Institute lecturers at Kanda University of International Studies, Japan, aimed at effectively integrating mandatory reflective lessons with classroom tasks in an English language lesson to enhance engagement in the reflective process. Facing challenges with scheduling and student proficiency when utilizing established learning advisor-led reflective materials, the authors adapted a 90-minute lesson. The adapted lesson followed a task-based language teaching (TBLT) framework that was then expanded to provide training to reflect deeply, in which students wrote and analyzed their own reflections. TBLT was chosen due to its integrated connections to reflection in the post-task phase, the abundance of literature regarding implementation, the communicative focus matching the teachers' course focus, and the emphasis on a clear outcome occurring from the task. Drawing on teacher reflections, the authors highlight how the task provided an engaging experience for the students to reflect on. Furthermore, by giving explicit training, the lesson appeared to help raise students' awareness of their current reflective skills and teach them what is needed to improve their reflections. Finally, the teachers believe that having students write and analyze their own reflections led to increased engagement in the reflective process. This approach highlights the importance of intentionally combining concrete tasks and personal reflections with explicit reflective training to promote deeper reflection in language education.

本省察論文は、神田外語大学英語教育研究所の新任講師2名が開発した教授法を検証するもので、英語授業における必修の省察活動を教室内タスクと効果的に統合し、学生の省察への関与を高めることを目的としている。従来のラーニングアドバイザー主導の省察教材には、授業スケジュールや学生の英語力との不一致といった課題があったため、著者らは90分授業をタスク中心言語教授法（TBLT）に基づいて再構成した。この授業では、学生が省察を書き、その内容を分析する訓練を取り入れ、より深い省察を促している。TBLTを採用した理由は、タスク後活動との親和性、研究の豊富さ、コミュニケーション重視の特性、明確な成果物が得られる点にある。教師の省察によれば、このタスクは学生にとって省察を行う魅力的な経験となり、明示的な訓練によって自身の省察スキルへの気づきや改善点の理解につながった。また、省察の記述と分析を学生自身が行うことで、省察過程への関与も高まったと考えられる。本アプローチは、深い省察を促すには、具体的なタスクと個人的な省察に明示的な訓練を組み合わせることが重要であることを示している。

**Keywords:** in-class reflection, task-based language teaching, teacher collaboration, learner engagement

In April 2024, we (Brandon and Jason) began as lecturers in the English Language Institute (ELI) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), a private Japanese university. At KUIS, we teach Freshman English, a mandatory English course for first-year students, which focuses mainly on English communication skills. Freshman English spans two semesters, with each semester being broken into three units. Our classes consist mostly of Japanese first-year university students and a few students from other countries, with class sizes of around 20 students. We each teach three classes of Freshman English, totaling six different classes, resulting in approximately 120 students. The students are of mixed English proficiency, ranging from what we would estimate to be around Common European Framework of Reference for Languages level A2 to B1 (Council of Europe, 2001). Freshman English, like all ELI courses, follows an English-only policy, meaning students may speak only English in the classroom.

At KUIS, students have access to a Self-Access Learning Center (SALC), staffed by Learning Advisors (LAs) who work individually with students to support their language learning process. LAs also collaborate with the ELI, bridging the English classroom and the SALC. For example, they lead or assist with mandatory reflective lessons during classroom visits in the Freshman English course. A group of ELI teachers and LAs designed the materials for these lessons to encourage reflective practices and equip freshman students with skills that support their success at university. (See the design process described in Curry et al., 2023 and Lyon et al., 2023.)

As new ELI lecturers, we had an issue properly integrating LAs' class visits into our lessons due to scheduling difficulties, as the tight three-unit semester sometimes made it hard to find times that were suitable for both LAs and lecturers. We also had two concerns when conducting the mandatory reflective lessons. First, students seemed less interested in these lessons than in typical lessons. We thought this might be because students did not understand how the content connected to them personally. The second concern was the students' varying English proficiency: the reflective lessons and materials were sometimes too advanced for them to engage with effectively. To address these issues while delivering the reflective lessons, we adapted the activities from the second semester to be more active and student-centered, without changing the content.

This paper examines a 90-minute lesson in which we followed a task-based language teaching (TBLT) framework that we then expanded to teach content from one of the mandatory reflective lessons. The paper begins with a brief literature review, followed by an explanation of the adapted lesson. The next part of the paper provides our observations of the

students during the lesson. Finally, possible improvements and future directions are discussed, concluding with overall reflections on the experience.

## **Literature Review**

### **Reflection in Language Learning**

Reflection is defined by Mynard (2023) as “the intentional examination of experiences, thoughts and actions in order to learn about oneself and inform change and personal growth” (p. 23). According to Thejll-Madsen (2018), reflection is used in multiple fields, including nursing, engineering, social sciences, as well as education, indicating its relevance in both professional and educational settings. Some potential benefits of reflection in the language-learning context include helping students notice their strengths and weaknesses, increasing self-efficacy, and spurring self-motivation (Maher, 2015).

However, there is evidence that students lack reflective skills, and those new to university, especially in the Japanese context, may have little or no experience with reflection (Sakata & Fukuda, 2018). Studies by Sampson et al. (2020, as cited in Mynard, 2023) and Sampson (2023) found that even after two years of practice, most students produced only basic, descriptive reflections, emphasizing the need for explicit reflective training. This idea is shared by Mynard (2023), who states that reflection “should coincide with training or awareness-raising for students about the purpose, process and benefits of reflection so that they see the value” (p. 29). Nonetheless, while explicit instruction requires classroom time, evidence shows that incorporating reflective activities into lessons improves both reflective and self-directed learning skills (Pemberton & Mynard, 2023), helping students become more familiar with the reflective process; however, the development of reflective ability is not necessarily linear. For example, Ambinintsoa and MacDonald (2023) found that over the course of an academic year, some learners’ reflections deepened, while others became shallower or showed little change, suggesting that factors such as learners’ interests, physical or emotional conditions, and their perceived value of reflection may mediate the impact of reflective instruction.

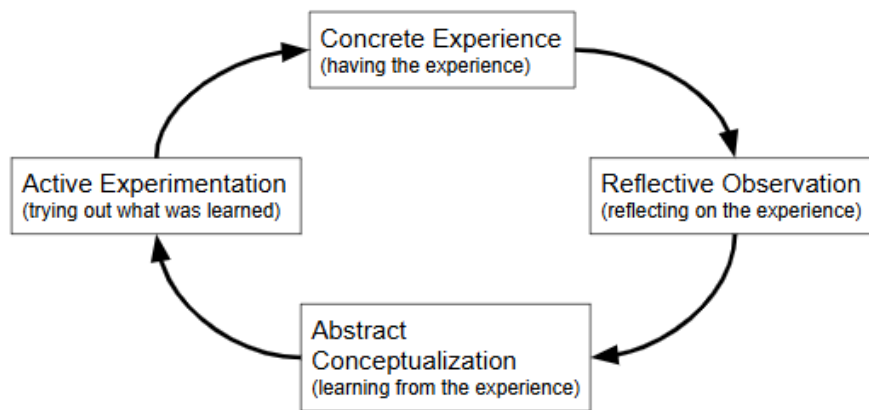
### **Experiential Learning and Task-Based Language Teaching**

Reflection needs to have a purpose and not be implemented haphazardly (Boud & Walker, 1998; Thejll-Madsen, 2018). Therefore, it seems important to consider what students are reflecting on. Reflection often emerges from experiences (Boyd & Fales, 1983; Kolb, 1984; Mynard, 2023), highlighting the value of an experience-rich classroom that supports

reflective practice. Kolb's (1984) well-known experiential learning cycle clearly establishes these connections between experience and reflection: learners have a concrete experience, reflect on it, learn from it, and apply what they learned in the next iteration of the cycle (see Figure 1). In other words, experiential learning emphasizes “learning by doing” (Nunan, 2004). Incorporating the experiential learning cycle into the classroom can strengthen the connection between students' experience and their reflections.

**Figure 1**

*Experiential Learning Cycle*



*Note.* Adapted from Kolb (1984, p. 33)

An approach whose conceptual basis stems from the experiential learning cycle is TBLT, which frames experiences as “tasks” and similarly emphasizes “learning by doing” (Nunan, 2004; Wilson, 1986). TBLT is used in many contexts, and literature discussing its implementation is easy to find (Chunliu & Guangsheng, 2025). Tasks typically include four components: 1. focus on meaning; 2. some sort of gap; 3. use of learners' own linguistic resources; and 4) a clear communicative outcome (Ellis, 2003; Ellis & Shintani, 2014; Nunan, 2004). Tasks follow three phases: pre-task, task, and post-task (see Table 1) (Ellis, 2002). The post-task phase is critical for learners to help them understand their performance through reflection and feedback. For example, Khezrlou (2021) found that students who engaged in guided reflection between repeated tasks outperformed those who did not, demonstrating the value of reflection following concrete experiences.

**Table 1***Phases of a Task*

Phase	Main focus	Typical activities
Pre-task	Preparation	Introduce topic, teach key words, model task
Task	Communication	Complete a goal in group
Post-task	Reflection and feedback	Reflection, feedback, focus-on-form, reporting

*Note.* Adapted from Ellis (2002, p. 80)

TBLT has proven to have positive benefits on language learning, leading to increased language proficiency and communicative competence, and positive affective outcomes such as motivation, engagement, confidence, and reduced anxiety (Bao & Du, 2015; Chua & Lin, 2020; Chunliu & Guangsheng, 2025). Considering these points, implementing TBLT in communicative-based courses could work towards the overall goals of the course.

Based on the literature, it appears that while explicit student training can provide learners with the tools needed to become more effective reflective practitioners, a lack of “concrete experience” can leave students uncertain about what they are reflecting on (e.g., Ambinintsoa & MacDonald, 2023; Pemberton & Mynard, 2023). To address this, we designed a classroom lesson intended to provide such experience, beginning with a communicative task followed by an initial reflection. Explicit training to reflect deeply is then given, culminating in students reviewing and analyzing their earlier reflections. In doing so, we aim to help students engage more in the reflective process by having an experience directly tied to their own reflections.

### **Adapting a Reflective Lesson Through a TBLT-Informed Approach**

#### **Original Reflective Lesson**

The original reflective activity, part of the mandatory reflective lessons for Freshman English, was designed to introduce students to deep reflection. It begins with the teacher or LA explaining how reflection can help students notice aspects of their language learning (e.g., difficulties or effectiveness of learning resources) and then describes the benefits of reflecting deeply. Key features of deep reflection are then highlighted, including examining

their feelings, thinking of solutions to problems, providing evidence to their claims, and brainstorming future directions. Then, the class reviews and discusses two example reflections—one deep and one less so. Finally, students work in groups to read, analyze, and discuss additional prepared sample reflections.

### **Rationale and Description of Adaptations**

As mentioned in our introduction, we had two primary concerns regarding the original lesson, which led us to adapt it (see Appendix for the adapted lesson plan).

First, we thought that discussing prepared sample reflections could reduce engagement. To foster a more personal connection to the reflective process, we wanted students to write their own reflections. To address this concern, we adapted the lesson to follow the TBLT cycle: 1. pre-task warm-up discussion; 2. task to establish an experience; and 3. post-task written reflection about the task. While this provided the students with an experience to reflect on, we determined that the TBLT cycle alone was insufficient in providing the training necessary for students to reflect more deeply and the opportunity to analyze their own reflections.

To solve these deficiencies, we expanded beyond TBLT by including three more parts: 4. training to reflect deeply using the original reflective lesson; 5. revision of written reflections from the post-task; and 6. group discussion about improvements. However, this still left us with our second concern, that the original lesson might be too difficult for our students due to the language used and the amount of text to read. To address this, language from the original lesson was shortened and simplified for part four.

The lynchpin to the reflections was the first part of the adaptation: the experience, or task, as it shall be referred to henceforth. We decided to incorporate TBLT for four reasons. First, as stated in the literature review, its conceptual foundation in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle aligns the task with reflection in the post-task phase, supporting improved performance. Second, we felt that TBLT offers extensive literature and practical guidance for classroom implementation. Third, both the Freshman English course at KUIS and TBLT emphasize communication. Finally, the focus on achieving a clear task outcome provides a concrete experience that supports meaningful reflection.

### **Description of the Task to Establish an Experience**

In step two of our adapted lesson, we introduced a task to our students where they worked in groups to build a bridge using straws and tape. After 20 minutes, each bridge was

tested by placing it between two desks to see how much weight it could hold. The rules were simple: students could use only 25 straws, limit their use of tape, and speak only in English.

### **Teacher Reflections**

Our modified lesson had six parts: 1. pre-task, 2. task, 3. post-task, 4. training to reflect deeply, 5. analysis, and 6. discussion. Since student data from the written reflections cannot be discussed, we will focus on our impressions of how the task was performed, student engagement with the training on how to reflect deeply, and the final discussions students had regarding their reflections. Our observations come from what we saw or heard in class, our feelings about it, and from discussions we had with one another following the lesson.

### **Task Performance**

During the task, students appeared challenged by the language component, yet the classroom atmosphere remained positive, and engagement was consistently high. When communication breakdowns occurred, it looked as though students used gestures, manipulated the materials to convey their thoughts, or searched online for phrases to express their ideas and real bridge examples from which to draw inspiration for their own. These observations suggest that students' motivation to use English was likely high, as we did not notice the use of Japanese, indicating that tasks like this may support adherence to the ELI's English-only policy.

It appeared to us that the collaborative and unique nature of the task also helped lower the tension. Throughout the class, we witnessed students laughing as they talked to each other and often noted peer-teaching occurring as they demonstrated how to use the materials. When weights were added to the bridges, the class often reacted with excitement, creating a game-like atmosphere. We consider all of these as indications that students not only enjoyed the task but also remained engaged from start to finish.

To our knowledge, none of our students had previously experienced a task like this; they appeared to value the freedom it offered. While most groups focused on building a strong bridge, some prioritized aesthetics, going so far as to name them. In one class, this idea seemed to spread, and we sensed that the goal shifted from "holding the most weight" to "being the most beautiful and holding the most weight". We believe that in a traditional activity, students would not have had this opportunity to explore a different facet of the task.



We also felt that the task lent itself to facilitating richer reflection, as students observed the outcomes of their classmates' bridges. While we initially worried about distraction, students engaged analytically, discussing why a bridge succeeded or failed, suggesting thoughtful consideration of peers' ideas.

### **Training to Reflect Deeply**

Our impression was that while the training fulfilled its role, it may have been the weaker part of this lesson. We noticed that students tended to lose focus, and during group discussions, several appeared unsure of what to do. We suspect this may be due to the energy expended during the task or the volume of new information presented at once. Specifically, Brandon observed that some students looked to be struggling with the amount of input, implying that more scaffolding might have helped streamline this section of the lesson. Regardless of these issues, we both agreed that the training seemed to have a positive impact on the students, as student discussions appeared to be self-analytical.

### **Discussions**

A key adaptation from the original lesson was having students write and discuss their own reflections rather than using prepared examples. This change appeared to enhance engagement, with students openly sharing areas needing improvement with enthusiasm. In contrast, Jason observed that students discussing sample reflections in later classes were reluctant, and their discussions remained brief and superficial. This suggests that connecting reflections to personal experiences promotes deeper engagement.

### **Future Directions**

When considering future directions, one key point is how tasks are integrated with reflection. This can be done in several ways. First, the task we described above could be repeated with the students. There is evidence that task repetition leads to improved language usage (Ellis, 2018), and further benefits arise when teachers ensure reflection is integrated (Khezlrou, 2021). An additional step could be combining task repetition with reviewing written reflections, which could provide the students with a stronger understanding of the benefits of deeper reflection. Second, similar hands-on tasks, such as building towers or egg-drop activities, could be paired with reflection to reinforce learning. Again, it would benefit the students to review past reflections from these tasks to remind them of previous experiences. This could be achieved through a reflective journal, which can help them check and monitor their progress, and create a habit of reflection (Kato & Mynard, 2016).

While the in-class training to reflect deeply appears to be effective, changes to its implementation could also be beneficial. Instead of front-loading everything into one lesson, it could be taught to students over several lessons, each with a different reflective focus. For example, one lesson could focus on the importance of feelings, and another could be solution-focused. This might help the students better understand the parts that make up the whole.

### Final Thoughts

Integrating reflection in the classroom is not a novel idea; however, we believe combining reflection with tasks is an engaging and fun way for our students to practice both their language and reflective skills. Tasks lend themselves to reflection by helping the students focus on a condensed experience. We are thankful to be in a place that provides a rich environment for students to continue developing their reflective skills and that strives to integrate the SALC and the classroom. It is through our interactions with the SALC and LAs that we were driven to develop our own reflective practices and provide meaningful experiences to our students.

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## Appendix

### Lesson Plan Adapting TBLT with Training to Reflect Deeply

Estimated time	Step Teacher and students' role	Material	Type of classwork
5 minutes	1. Pre-task Teacher welcomes students and assigns groups.  Students talk about what they have built and the useful language needed for making something.	● Slideshow	Group work
30 minutes	2. Task Teacher explains the task, hands out the material, and shows an example gap between two desks so they know how wide their bridges should be.  Students make bridges in groups.  After 20 minutes, each bridge is tested by adding weights until it collapses.	● 25 straws per group ● Roll of tape per group ● Weights to place on bridges	Group Work
15 minutes	3. Post-task Students write a reflection about their experience doing the task.	● Online worksheet	Individual
10 minutes	4. Training to reflect deeply Teacher lectures students about how to reflect more deeply.	● Slideshow	Whole class
15 minutes	5. Analysis Students review their reflection to identify strengths and areas for deeper reflection.	● Online worksheet	Individual
15 minutes	6. Discussion Students discuss their reflections and explain how they can make them deeper.	● Online worksheet	Group work