

## WRITING REFLECTIVE JOURNALS INFLUENCES STUDENTS' VOCABULARY MASTERY

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### Abstract

The concern of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of writing reflective journals right after having an English class on students' vocabulary mastery. A reflective journal is a tool that allows students to reflect on and write about progress in their learning. They can identify and reflect on their successes and challenges. Teachers can gain information on what the students think and feel not in a threatening way. This study is conducted through a quasi experimental study which aims to determine whether writing reflective journals can improve students' vocabulary mastery. A total of 63 students (two classes having the same ability) from the second grade of Semesta Vocational High School of Bumiayu, Brebes, Central Java, participated in this study. The result of the study suggests that there is no significant correlation between giving students writing reflective journal right after their English class and their vocabulary mastery. The hypothesis concluding that there are significant differences in vocabulary mastery of students asked to compose a reflective journal every after finishing English class with students that are not asked to do so is rejected due to the significant level gained from the SPSS calculation from the result of pretest and post-test that is 0.394 or 39,4%. The reasons answering this phenomena are the lack of treatment time, the lack of students' effort in composing journals, unsupporting material, and no interactive writing journal.

**Keywords :** reflective journals, vocabulary mastery, quasi-experimental study

### Introduction

In learning language, we need to master two points of language its self; surface structure and deep structure. Surface structure includes the understanding of morphology, and syntax. Morphemes are the basic units of language learning, or it can be stated that the very basic thing to know is about words or vocabularies due to its function in comprehending all skills in language, particularly English. Vocabulary is central to language and of critical competence to the typical language learner (Coady and Hackin, 1998). Widiyaningsih (2009) added it is of primary importance of the English teaching and learning because it has a pivotal role in molding the four language skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading and writing. On the other hand, vocabulary is the aspect of L2 learning that is often assumed to be maximally tractable (Catherine E. Snow & Young-Suk Kim, 2007). It is very important for the English learner to acquire vocabularies as many as

possible to support their four English skills. Unfortunately, vocabulary is often neglected in most second and foreign language classes (Fernández, Prahlad, Rubtsova, & Sabitov, (2009). Widaningsih (2009), nevertheless, points out that vocabulary mastery should be the first priority in English language teaching and learning. In the same vein, McCarthy (1990) emphasizes that one of the most important skills that teachers of English can give to learners is a wide range of rich vocabulary. Stanovich (1981), however, believes that it is impossible for learners to perform well in English if their vocabulary is very poor. Thornbury (2002, p.13) puts it succinctly: If you spend most of your time studying grammar, your English will not improve very much. You will see most improvement if you learn more words and expressions. You can say very little with grammar, but you can say almost anything with words.

Moreover, it is not surprising that vocabulary acquisition is a huge challenge.

It is estimated that high-school graduates need to know 75,000 words in English-that means having learned 10-12 words every single day between the ages of 2 and 17 (Catherine E. Snow & Young-Suk Kim, 2007). Hence, it is very essential to teach vocabulary to the students learning second or foreign language. It is connected between learning vocabularies and successful communication that is the aim of learning language. Mastering vocabularies will ease the process of learning to read and write which is the key developmental milestone in a literate society (Christopher J. Lonigan, 2007).

One of the solutions to solve this dilemma is to make the students learn and acquire vocabularies through some ways of teaching that actually force them to learn, memorize and apply vocabularies subconsciously, namely writing reflective journal. This activity can be done right after the teaching and learning processes. There has been a body of research in which the task was autobiographical in nature (Anderson 1982, Hettich 1976, 1980, 1988, 1990, MacManus 1986, Terry 1984 via Cisero 2006). However, in this article, reflective journal writing is defined broadly as meaningfully interacting with the teaching and learning processes by applying information to personal experiences.

In academic language study, the writing system is often an immediate point of focus, as it serves as the entry point for vocabulary and grammar study (Kern, 2000). Writing activities in general is recognized as methods that enhance critical thinking (Hettich 1990, Young and Fulwiler 1986). Reflective journal writing, in particular, has many potential benefits for learning in all types of disciplines. One immediate advantage is that writing allows students to contextualize the new information they are acquiring (Elbow, 1993), allowing them to make sense of what they are learning rather than merely memorizing. Students are able to ask questions, admit confusion, make

connections, and grow ideologically (Good and Whang 1999).

However, learning to write is very essential to improve students' competence in English due to the complexity of the factors in writing. One of them is vocabulary mastery. Hence, this aim of the study is to investigate whether writing reflective journal influences students' vocabulary mastery.

Several studies investigated the effects of reflective journal writing on students' learning. O'Connell and Dymont (2006) investigated the benefits of the journal as a tool to encourage students in the process of reflecting on their own learning and improving their own writing skills. To produce good writing, the students have to master many vocabularies in order to be appropriate in selecting the diction used.

Spaulding and Wilson (2002) examined the journals of 34 students. They posited that reflective journal writing can serve four purposes for the student. According to them, journal writing is important for students as it serves as a permanent record of thoughts and experiences, establishes and maintains a relationship with the instructor, provides a safe outlet for frustrations and concerns; and aids internal dialogue. Consequently, reflective journal writing can aid in promoting critical thinking skills when learners use the writing process to analyze challenging classroom issues and to establish alternative solutions to those problems (Dymont, and O'Connell, 2003).

Based on the reviewed literature, it is noticed that reflective journal writing is vital for maximizing students' vocabulary mastery, increasing motivation, and developing critical thinking skills. Moreover, some researchers reported better achievement for students in the subject matter.

### Methodology

This study is conducted in quasi-experimental method. It is not used pure-experiment because the researcher cannot control some aspects influencing the vocabulary mastery instead of writing reflective journal. The design of the research is Nonequivalent control group design. This design is about the same as pretest-post-test control group design, yet in this design, the experimental group and the control group is not chosen randomly. The two group will face pretest and post-test. A pretest was used to measure the students' previous knowledge of vocabulary. A post-test was also used at the end of the study to measure whether there was a significant change on the learners' vocabulary mastery after receiving writing reflective journals.

The setting of this study is Semesta vocational high school in Bumiayu, Brebes Regency, Central Java. The population of this study is all the second-graders, whereas the samples are only two classes of Health-care Analyst (Analisis Kesehatan) consisting 63 students taught by the same English teacher. The purposive sampling is used to determine the classes which are chosen to be the sample. The second grade of Health-care Analyst (Analisis Kesehatan) one then is pointed to be the experimental group which is treated to be given writing reflective journal right after the English teacher finishes explaining the material. And the second grade of Health-care Analyst (Analisis Kesehatan) two is the class which is not given any treatment dealing with writing reflective journal after the class, which is called the control group.

Both classes are given pretest of vocabulary consisting of 40 numbers of questions formed into five synonyms, five antonyms, ten definition matching and twenty completing sentences from some words in parentheses. The pretest questions are already checked the validity and the reliability by giving them to the students of other major, that is the second graders of Pharmacy (2 classes).

After being tested and the result is significant, the experimental group and the control group are given the pretest. After the pretest, the English teacher starts to give treatment to the experimental group. When it is considered enough, the teacher conducts post test to the both groups.

### Findings and Discussion

The Tables below present the results of data analysis. The interpretation and the discussion of the emerging patterns are based on these results. The analysis of the data collected uses SPSS statistics 22.

Table 1. Pretest and Post Test Mean Comparison

	Pretest	Post-test	N
Experimental	55.9375	70.0781	32
Control	56.0968	63.9516	31

The mean performance of the two groups (experimental and control group) are about the same:  $M=55.94$  is about the same as  $56.09$ . it can be concluded that both groups have the same competence in their vocabulary mastery.

After being treated by the reflective journal writing in the class for the experimental group, the mean results for the post-test of the two group show the differences. Mean of the experimental group in the post-test indicates higher score than the control group. But, if we take a look into the second table from the analysis of the correlation Pearson Product moment, we can find different result.

Table 2. Correlations

		Pre-Test	Post-test
Pre-Test	Pearson Correlation	1	.156
	Sig. (2-tailed)	32	32
	N		
Post-Test	Pearson Correlation		1
	Sig. (2-tailed)		32
	N		

The table shows the correlation between variable Y “Vocabulary Mastery” and variable X “Reflective Journal Writing” with the subject (N) 20. The significant level from the correlation between the pretest result and the post-test result is 0.394. The hypothesis will be rejected if the significant level of the correlation is  $P > 0.05$  (5%) (Burhan Nurgiyantoro, Gunawan and Marzuki, 2000). Whereas from the statistical data gained from SPSS, for this study, the significant level / P is 0.394 (39.4%), or it is not significant. Based on the statistical data, the hypothesis stating that writing reflective journal influences students’ vocabulary mastery is rejected.

The general finding of the study indicates that the use of reflective journal writing in the teaching of vocabulary in English as a Second Language is not effective and subsequently does not influence students’ vocabulary mastery. The statistics show that the learners who were exposed to reflective journal writing did not do much better in the post test than their colleagues who were not. Even though, the experimental score for the post-test is better than the control group, but the result does not indicate the significant improvement of the students’ vocabulary mastery.

Many reasons possibly explain these findings. The first reason is from the time given to the treatment session. The short time in giving the treatment seems to be one of some factors causing the ineffectiveness of reflective journal writing in improving students’ vocabulary mastery. The treatment was only done twice (the first meeting in 13 of April 2017 and the second meeting in 20 of April 2017) with 40 minutes in each meeting. This is because of limited time available in conducting this study due to middle term test and National examination faced by the third graders.

The second factor causing the ineffectiveness is students’ competence in understanding what the reflective journal

is and optimizing their ability in writing. From the journals written by the students can be found that the reflective journals produced by the students are far from the reflective journal supposed to be. Most of students’ journal only consist of a short paragraph consisting no more than four short sentences. Though the journal should be ungraded to encourage the students inhibit their free thought and write freely without the pressure of the grade (Jensen and Denton, 1991) but, Hahnemann (1986) found that students put little effort into the writing in ungraded journal. Reynolds (1997) recommended that although no specific grade should be given for the journal, appropriate feedback should be conveyed.

The next factor is the material given at the treatment session that did not support in composing a journal. At the two treatment phases, the material discussed in the class is Grammar Discussion. In fact, in this kind of discussion the exposure to the students about experiences, new knowledge and information, issues and cases are less. The material considered supporting this method (writing reflective journal) is a material that forces the students to read a lot, analyze a lot, understand and comprehend much as well as synthesize more. Those points can really help the students’ intake of some new vocabularies helping the students to compose a reflective journal.

The following factor also takes part in this study, which is interactive journal writing. Interactive journal writing is a method whereby the students hand in journal to the instructor at frequent intervals (ie. Weekly) and the instructor give comments, ask questions about the entry and provides feedback about the students’ reflection. Interactive journal writing not only provides stimulation but also is a useful strategy to enable students to develop and upgrade their reflective writing skills (Williams, Sundelin, Foster-Seargeant, Norman,

2000). during the treatment, the journals written by the students did not get any interactions from the instructor. The English teacher did not discuss or do as what interactive reflective journal writing should be applied. From this case, the students did not obtain any correction, guidance to improve or even suggestion to be better in writing.

### Conclusion

The finding has shown that the class that used reflective journal writing as an additional method in teaching learning English, particularly in mastering vocabularies did better in the post test than the one exposed to the usual method (without reflective journal writing), but did not give any significant improvement on it. The difference is only slightly different. Actually this method is effective and able to help English teachers in making students' vocabulary improved if the application of this method based on some points; they are (1) enough time of treating the students with this method, (2) make the students are eager and put much effort to compose good journals, (3) create supporting material to ease the students to create reflective journals towards what they face, experience, get and learn from their class and the most important thing is (4) interactive reflective journal writing; the teacher not only commands the students to write a reflective journal, but also asks them to hand in everything that they have written and try to give feedback on their work.

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