

# Critical Reflection of an Iranian EFL Classroom: Effective Ploys in Narrative Paragraph Writing Development

Fatemeh Mohammad Jafari

Department of Foreign Languages, Fars Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Marvdasht, Iran

E-mail: fatemeh\_m\_jafari@yahoo.com

Alireza Ameri (Corresponding author)

Department of English, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, South Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

E-mail: a\_ameri@azad.ac.ir

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## Abstract

This article describes a qualitative study that investigated critical reflection in the hope that effective learning is objectified. It is the fruit of rumination on how critical reflection approach would affect learners' performance in narrative writing. The idea for this paper arose when the researchers consistently utilized ploys effective for five EFL students' learning of narrative writing in critical reflection process in an institute. Later, these ploys were categorized in three themes under three categories in teaching narrative writing. Data were gathered via students' reflective writings. Gathered data were interpreted in the real setting by small scale grounded theory analysis. The final upshot demonstrated the criticality of students' thoughts in their paper. The findings reveal the significance of optimal rapport and intimacy in which participants move ahead from mechanical learning to more cooperative approach in language learning with thorough reflection in their narrations for effective learning to take place.

**Keywords:** Critical Reflection, Narrative Paragraph Writing, Effective Learning, Ploys, Improvisation, Reverse Position, Social Camaraderie

## 1. Introduction

There is a growing concern in the concept of reflection, particularly critical reflection. Although these two concepts have the same meaning and usage in education, not all reflection is critical reflection. While moderating distortions in our beliefs is possible through reflection, it is by critical reflection that connections are made and new knowledge is created. This may occur in the case that learners accept other opposing ideas, which may culminate in positive, productive changes in them. Such changes can be consolidated by adopting reflective writings in the process of critical reflection by which learners can easily express themselves and critically reflect their thoughts on their sheets.

While transformation in perspectives is the main outcome of critical reflection, growing people who develop greater effective understanding and learning should be another main concern of critical reflection. Effective learning can happen when the learning outcomes are highlighted and purposes of critical reflection are not emphasized. That is to say, among many different learning environments along with different purposes, there would be wide variation of ways and means used in the practice of critical reflection. As a consequence, in the process of critical reflection in teaching English skills, if language teachers are armed with means in teaching each one of the English skills there would be effective learning which can guide learners toward self-actualization and creating prolific incentive to better their competency and performance.

Concurrently, this study intends to introduce effective ploys, clever methods used in teaching narrative writing, in critical reflection process for narrative paragraph writing development to take place. At the end, although this study investigated the two concepts of reflection and critical reflection in learning narrative paragraph writing, there can be further unpacking to clearly identify these two concepts for better teaching other skills in foreign language learning.

## 2. Literature Review

To fulfill the purpose of this study and in order for the educators/readers to have a clear picture of the idea, trying to map and have a clear meaning of just what critical reflection is, what its effects are and how we can make both critical reflection and narrative writing seems apt and worthwhile.

### 2.1 Reflection

According to social theories reflection can play a vital role for individuals, their role, and influences of it in social interaction (Panadit, 2011). Long (1996) stated that interaction plays an important role in the learning process because of the feedback that learners receive during interaction. Dewey (1933) identified learning as a reflective activity that is

based on the individual's prior understanding of the relationships between parts of his or her experience that could lead to a new interpretation of the relationships. Reflection is "the process of critically assessing the content, process, or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience" (Mezirow, 1991, P. 104).

Depending on Aristotle's three forms of reason "technical, practical and theoretical" (Kemmis, 1985, P. 141), there could be three forms of reflection: "problem solving, practical deliberation and speculative thought" (Kemmis, 1985, P. 142). The problem solving form is directly related to reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action is reflection that individuals get engaged in as they confront a problem in their life. Reflection-on-action (the most common type) on the other hand, is the kind that people get involved in their back in a group (Schon, 1983).

## 2.2 Different Kinds of Reflection

There exists a trichotomy of reflections:

- Content reflection: *what* an individual perceives or thinks,
- Process reflection: *how* we perform these perceiving, thinking, feeling, or acting
- Premise or critical reflection: *why* we perceive, think, or feel

## 2.3 Critical Reflection

Critical reflection makes sense out of experiences which ends in learning. It mainly differs from reflection, because it involves being aware of the power dynamics of the situation instead of reflection's limited scope of examining the more immediate details of problems (Reynolds, 1999).

Writing is a method which helps to reduce stress levels. Critical reflection can be evidenced by narrative writing in any process. Narrative is a complex, critical event especially for reflection which links language to experience. By the help of narrative one can reveal their uniqueness. "Being aware of our own uniqueness provides a path way to self-discovery. Discovering our own voices in educational settings, guide us to assist ourselves in life's events, or even change our own behaviors" (Ward, 2001).

## 2.4 Tools and Processes for Promoting Critical Reflection

There are several techniques for materializing critical reflection. Therefore, in order to facilitate critical reflection learning process in this study, the researcher followed some of these techniques in the hope that under their influence effective teaching and learning objectified. Some of which are mentioned below.

### 2.4.1 Storytelling

Storytelling is a powerful means which is employed to explore and understand ones' own values, ideas and norms (Gold and Holman, 2001, as cited in Gray, 2006). Storytelling is trying to persuade us to share meanings, therefore, it can be the preferred sense making skill in human relationships (Gray, 2006).

Stories also help students to articulate quite complex events they are involved, which helps them to develop new insights and understandings, new perspectives and therefore, new ways of acting. This analysis of arguments also helps students and teachers to recognize the perspectives of their classmates and students.

Knowing principles governing storytelling means having a degree of self-understanding, self-insight and self-respect, cornerstone of perspective transformation (Gray, 2006).

The process of storytelling can be improved by practicing in pairs or listening to others' stories. It facilitates reflection, self-awareness and a better (critical) understanding of others as well as themselves. Therefore, learning and new behaviors or awareness happen. Central to this approach is valuing doubt and uncertainty, so that a space can be opened up for critical self-reflection and emancipation (Gray, 2006).

### 2.4.2 Picture Story

The impact of pictures in stories is clear. It is proved that using picture stories have positive impact on students' motivation, comprehension, confidence, interpretation, and creativity (Hsiu-Chih, 2008, as cited in Rausch, 2011). From teachers' side they should be tolerant toward different opinions and various learning styles.

An increase in motivation is seen as a reflection both of the inherent interest of stories, which is increased by the pictures, and an outcome of the increased comprehension that comes with being able to understand the story through the pictures, all of which then inspire learner confidence with the language (Rausch, 2011).

Stories allow for many interpretations, a reflection of individual creativity and tolerance for different viewpoints and opinions.

### 2.4.3 Reflecting on Critical Incidents

Critical incidents involve an interpretation of the significance of an event (Tripp, 1993). The events are not necessarily dramatic events, and may occur in the routine of everyday life.

At first sight, many of these events appear to be 'typical' rather than 'critical'. They become classified as critical, however, through the process of *reflective analysis*. Critical incidents go through two stages. The first is that the nature

of the incident becomes noted and described which should be richer and more detailed, in the second stage, the incident becomes critical when it is linked to a wider social context (Tripp, 1993).

### *2.5 Rapport and Cooperation*

Brown (2001) maintains that as students work together in pairs or groups, they share information and come to each other's aid. He believes that the students are a team whose players must work together in order to achieve goals successfully.

As a matter of fact, developing interpersonal interaction between the facilitator and the experiencers in the target language in the class is located at the heart of establishing rapport. An apt technique to do so is to encourage the learners to work in groups. Then a sense of belonging is grown in the members of the groups, the whole class. Even the groups are motivated to communicate with each other to form a whole, which is the class. This is the gist of whole language learning.

Rapport is the relationship or connection that teachers establish with their students, a relationship built on trust and respect that leads to students' feeling capable, competent, and creative (Brown, 2001).

Students working in groups can begin to feel a sense of community and can learn from each other as well as the teacher; as a result, cooperation, not competition is encouraged. In consequence, communicative interaction encourages cooperative relationships among the students. It gives them an opportunity to work on negotiating meaning.

In short, students learning collaboratively have been shown to use higher level learning strategies, are more motivated to learn, and are able to learn through cooperative problem solving.

### **3. Method, Participants, and Instrumentation**

In this qualitative study data were garnered through several informal interviews. The majority of the conversations fell into the category of unstructured or semi-structured interviews to make the participants free to follow their own paths. The data also were collected through the use of participant observation and participants' narrative writings over seven months. The five EFL pre-intermediate teenage students, three boys and two girls who all had passed English File 1 by Clive Oxenden and Christina Latham-Koenig (2007), participated in this research project. In the process of critical reflection, participants had originally gone through 22 sessions by which voice recorder was always working. At the very beginning of the process, the researchers/ teachers exposed participants to different pictures and reading, encouraged them to tell different personal stories, preparing their minds to talk and write. After twelve sessions of preparatory work for critical reflection, from session thirteen on, interesting topics about social issues were introduced to be discussed. The next step was to let them talk freely about their thoughts, and afterwards ask them to narrate and take a critical stance in reflecting whatever that happened in the class during the discussions on the paper in one or two paragraphs. For the purpose of investigating the level of criticality in participants, data were analyzed via reflective writing rubric adopted from Rhode Island Commission Rubrics.

In an attempt to analyze the garnered data, small scale grounded theory was employed. In terms of grounded theory, it was attempted to inductively derive meaning from data in the real setting. The data in this type of qualitative research were grounded together on a similar dimension, and this dimension was given a name, then, it became a category. Therefore, the following analyzed data were the result of investigating twenty-two class narrations in great details to provide thick and rich information for the study.

### **4. Findings and Analysis**

In this section, the gathered data were profoundly analyzed and scrutinized to constitute findings and results about the practical ways by which critical reflection could impact participants' narrative writing. Accordingly, for the purpose of effective learning to happen in the narrative writing class, throughout the process, there arose many different events which were the results of the two researchers'/teachers' adaptation ploys in the process of critical reflection. The events later were divided into the following tokens which were classified under three main themes for better organization. These themes fall into three broad categories of Establishing Rapport, Cooperative Learning, and Participants' Reflection. In all of these categories, Intrinsic Motivation, Learner Autonomy, Individualization, and Self-actualization are of pivotal significance.

The following table is set out to reveal the outcomes evoked from establishing rapport in association with deficiency needs of language learners. The elements of motivating class atmosphere are perfectly visible.

Table 1. Establishing Rapport

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Analysis</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Token</i>
<b>1. Social camaraderie</b>	<b>a. Psychological well being</b>	Communication	Fourth session, Commonalities
		Social awareness	Third session, a student's answer to teacher's question " Air pollution"
		Social health	Fourth session, a student 's drawing on the board
	<b>b. Intrinsic motivation</b>	Sense of security	Fourth session, One of student's interest in knowing his classmates
		Sense of belonging	Students' feeling toward this class
<b>c. Integrating in social network</b>	Equal attention to gender	Third session, participants reflections toward a sporty picture	
<b>d. Injecting more fun and joy</b>	Healthy Humor	Third session " Chatter Box"	
<b>e. More intimacy</b>	Camaraderie	Sixth session, intimate conversations between participants	

Table 2 is intended to sum up the principal benefits originating from cooperative learning. The influences of participants' learning process are disclosed.

Table 2. Cooperative Learning

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Analysis</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Token</i>
<b>2.Participatory approach</b>	<b>a. Accounting for active involvement</b>	Role play	Fifth session, seventh session, and fifteenth session
	<b>b. Lowering teacher domination</b>	Mutual learning	Eleventh session,
	<b>c. Reverse position</b>	Moving forward from passivity to activity, and growing a feeling of self-importance and confidence	Fifth, seventh sessions, Taking teachers' place to make others understand the point,
	<b>d. Generating a sense of accomplishment</b>	Incarnation role-shift	Giving enough time and freedom to the participants in order to teach in whatever way they prefer to teach
	<b>e. Deliberate mistake</b>	Boosting Confidence Empathy	Third session, a mistake happened by the teacher, in spelling "Sur name" and "Halloween"
	<b>f. Naturalizing the procedure of language learning</b>	Improvising tasks	Third session, Birthday celebration discussion,
		Bona fide topics	Fourth session, one of students mood, affecting that session plan Fourth session, first paragraph, another student's reflection about his age and changes in his body
<b>f. Active thinking</b>	Imaginitivity/visual simulation	Fifth session, working on a photos to choose the sequences and write a story about them	
<b>g. Prolific collaboration among participants</b>	Voluntarism	From session sixth then on	

The third table is intended to sketch out the main merits that derived from participants' reflection. It actually confirms how reflection can usher in criticality.

Table 3. Participants' Reflection

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Analysis</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Token</i>
<b>3. Problem Solving</b>	<b>Mutual Trust and respect between participants and teachers</b>	Mistrust to trust	Fourth session, teachers' misunderstanding about one of the student's' writing and behavior
			Twentieth session, participants' concern about teacher's feelings
	<b>Sense of Sympathy</b>	Influencing behaviors	Session Eleventh, participants' try to make one of them to deal with his loss
	<b>Sense of Empathy</b>	Sharing feelings	Session fifteenth, participants' stories of their grand parents' death, and feeling they had
	<b>Developing a sense of belonging</b>	Reflection	Twelfth session, importance of the class for participants
	<b>Freedom of Expression</b>	Tolerance of ambiguity	Ninth session, dealing with opposing ideas
		Curtesy	Seventeenth session, Respect in return to opposing ideas
	<b>Encouraging risk-taking activities</b>	Courage	Seventh Session, gaining Courage to speak out loud in the class
		self-actualization	Seventh session, students' perfect learning
<b>Self-revealing</b>	side talent discovery	Fifth session, Being a good story teller, having especial talent in association of ideas	
	Self-discovery	Seventeenth session, talking about "Myself"	
<b>Gratifying internally</b>	Enjoyment/ Musical Pun	Fourth session, "Potato/Photato" Eleventh session, "Rabbit/Habit"	
	Edutainment	Nineteenth session Better concentration and writing act with music	
<b>Holding Challenging discussion</b>	Criticality in thoughts and writing	From sixteenth session then on	

#### 4.1 Discussion

One of the managerial affairs on the part of the teacher in an attempt to promote reflection, especially critical reflection in language learners is to establish and maintain appropriate rapport and camaraderie among them. Based on what Beattie (2001, P. 98) claims, good teaching is like being in a good relationship. It is stimulating, caring, full of trust, and fun. The process is as important as the goal, honesty, sharing, exploring, and cooperation, taking responsibility, mind-body connection, going into depth, and accepting. On the other hand, one of the non-linguistic outcomes of language learning is to be psychologically ready to use language to communicate that provides supportive social environment to start personal relationship with people who may help them to do well in learning.

According to the "Hierarchy of Needs' theory (Maslow, 1970, as cited in Griffin, 2011, P. 125), the four lower needs are called "deficiency needs" because their lack creates tension within us. So, the learners' rudimentary and basic needs are to be satisfied. In this regard, the initial point to take into consideration seems to be the matter of "Comfort". That is to say, the ambiance of the classroom must be comfortable enough so that the participants can feel at home. In so many

words, if the atmosphere of the classroom alienates the participants from the course and so on, the teachers' and students' objectives can hardly be objectified.

Therefore, throughout the process of data gathering, in the light of proper rapport and relationship, participants developed a sense of belongingness, personal and social identity. This sense of security along with Social Camaraderie, a feeling of friendship, significantly facilitated the procedure of learning for the learners. Considering social camaraderie, the researchers/ teachers changed the atmosphere of the classroom to a real society whose members were participants and interestingly they were integrated in a social network. In fact, they learned more in that setting in which they were cared for and in which their social developments were supported. Therefore, they all enjoyed the camaraderie, fundamental to language learning, which was the result of friendly, intimate atmosphere where there was tenable exchange of ideas and information with fun and pleasure in which creativity was always unlocked and permitted.

Following that, the atmosphere became more stress-free and comfortable between participants who became highly motivated by their personal involvement in the class activities. To fulfill this achievement, the teachers' domination became moderated. That is to say, the participants did not "wait for instruction, words of approval, correction advice, or praise" (Jones, 2007, P. 7). The two researchers/teachers became less dominant and directive and the process of learning turned out to be more enjoyable in the eyes of the language learners. Hence, the teachers and the participants had the chance to put their heads together to make enlightened decisions for getting most out of learning.

For the purpose of providing the learners with an atmosphere that was conducive to learning, "Reverse Position" for the teachers and participants developed. Reverse position means the role of the teacher and that of participants change intentionally. Therefore, the participants moved forward from being passive to have active roles in the classroom. In this fashion the participants were given a limited time to instruct not only to their peers but also to their teachers. Acting as a teacher made participants take responsibility in the classroom which persuaded others to cooperate, too. Nevertheless, in the ambiance of the classroom, the participants were encouraged to laugh with each other, not at each other. They worked with each other, not against each other. In this situation, destructive competition was replaced with constructive cooperation, and the result was that participants shared their own ideas to learn more. Indeed, asking the participants to think and act freely created self-worth and self-esteem in them. This self-worth developed their best to the course which grew a sense of accomplishment.

Subsequently, in order to minimize the negative influences of affective filter that prevents language learners from actualizing their goals, from time to time, the researchers/teachers set a suitable scene for themselves to be tested by the participants in grammar, spelling, and vocabulary. By the help of "deliberate mistake" they provided an empathy with their participants, and gave rise to their feeling of confidence.

Maheux and Lajoie (2010) consider improvisation as "the idea of doing something "in the moment", without a script or step-by-step preparation, and pretty much "in response to" one's immediate environment, inner feelings, and so on". As supported by Sawyer (2000), "every day conversation is creatively improvised- there is no script that guides a conversation". He emphasized the importance of three concepts of "creative process, collaboration, problem-finding and communication" in the process of improvisation.

Therefore, based on the above-mentioned facts, when the focus of teaching and learning is on natural communication, or on collaborative practice of target language in adaptable environment, improvisation that provides opportunities for learning and development becomes prominent. As a result of living in the natural, and collaborative setting, participants had the chance to exercise more creativity which would carry unplanned tasks and talks to devote to during the class time. Coming up with an event and make excellent use of it to encourage participants to learn, increased the dynamism in the classroom. Moreover, imaginative open-ended tasks activated their thoughts. For example focusing participants' attention on the pictures, allowed them to both discuss orally and write several lines in conjunction with the photos. In consideration of their writings, the participants were encouraged to write a story together within a simple structured framework, and using vocabulary they had learnt to move from creative and active thinkers to creative writers who were leaning collaboratively in the group.

Regarding interpersonal interaction between the researchers/teachers and the participants, there was mutual understanding, empathy, trust, respect, between them. The participants were encouraged to voice their thoughts to the course, to the member of group, and the whole class. In solving problem activities throughout the course, language learners were convinced to express their feelings and get involved in risk-taking activities which would reveal their inner selves. In return, the researchers/ teachers did not care about finding fault with them. This nonjudgmental environment made the participants gratified internally to enjoy every minute of learning English.

In the light of the observations made throughout the study, it was convinced that the stimulating discussions gave the learners an exceptional opportunity to share their ideas and findings with their friends. Holding challenging discussions also turned out to be pretty significant which resulted in maximum criticality in both their thoughts and their papers. Therefore, the challenging and intriguing topics to discuss about raised their language inquiry.

Analyzing participants' narration from the beginning to the end of the process, the followings are demonstrative of their critical progression. Participants' narrations were analyzed based on "Reflective writing rubric" adapted from Rhode Island Commission Rubrics.

Table 4. Critical Reflection in Narrative Writing

<b>A</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Setting the context by the appropriate use of descriptive language.</b></li> <li>• <b>Proposing questions</b></li> <li>• <b>Making connection between personal idea and subject matter</b></li> <li>• <b>Open-ended conclusions/ Making the readers think</b></li> </ul>
<b>B</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Using descriptive language to put the readers in context in Exceed standard</b></li> <li>• <b>Making connection between personal idea and subject matter</b></li> <li>• <b>Reflecting back to see the situation critically</b></li> <li>• <b>Closing the text and providing the reader to think about something in Exceed standard</b></li> </ul>
<b>C</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Making connection between personal idea and subject matter</b></li> <li>• <b>Criticizing herself</b></li> <li>• <b>Reflecting back to see things in-detail and carefully</b></li> <li>• <b>Leaving the reader something to think</b></li> </ul>
<b>D</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Proposing question</b></li> <li>• <b>Open-ended conclusions</b></li> <li>• <b>Leaving the reader something to think</b></li> </ul>
<b>E</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Using precise language and descriptive one to put the reader into the context</b></li> <li>• <b>Making connection between personal idea and subject matter</b></li> <li>• <b>Proposing question</b></li> <li>• <b>Reflecting on the issue by analyzing it in-detail</b></li> </ul>

In addition, the whole findings and results in this section brought up the subsequent table which is arranged the taught materials in ten steps to follow in narrative writing classroom. These teaching materials were all inspired by Whitakers' (2005) article who listed different items in teaching writing.

Table 5. Steps in teaching narrative writing with regard to critical reflection

1	Basic Sentence structure	<i>Sentence and its parts, Function of words/ Parts of speech, simple sentence</i>
2	<b>Capital Letters</b>	<i>Every sentence starts with capital letters</i>
3	<b>Short Paragraph ( Narrating their class)</b>	<i>Indentation, Unity, Paragraph Length, Story Writing task</i>
4	<b>Reading</b>	<i>Summary/ Participants' awareness toward ways they can write</i>
5	<b>Punctuations Coordinating Conjunction</b>	<i>Comma, Full stop, quotation mark (But, And, So, Or, Yet), Punctuation task</i>
6	<b>Time Clue Order of Importance</b>	<i>Chronological order, Process development, Mind-mapping</i>
7	<b>Signal words</b>	<i>Transitions, Semi colon, Transition task</i>
8	<b>Participants' choice and ownership</b>	<i>Helping students draw on their own experiences, interests, tendencies</i>
9	<b>Collaborative Writing</b>	<i>Removing grades Pair writing practice, Grammar needs analysis syllabus re-design, Grammar Task, Spelling Task</i>
10	<b>Academic Writing</b>	<i>Working professionally on Introduction, Body, and Conclusion Guided to semi-guided composition Emphasizing Critical thinking Editing their writing by the help of themselves</i>

## 5. Conclusion

The entire procedure of moving from a product-oriented approach to a process-oriented perspective, practicing narrative writing in critical reflection process by the help of different ploys motivated participants to get involved in class activities. Their choral attention was indeed on their own learning which resulted in more questions and answers, sharing ideas and enhancing information. As a consequence, they worked with each other and developed a sense of

cooperation. Accordingly, progress in spelling, vocabulary, and writing mechanics was perfectly visible. Participants' salubrious endeavor in English talking and criticality in writing were the other main outcomes of this humble practice of teaching writing.

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