

# Reflective Journaling

## Exploring EFL Students' Ethnocentric Perspectives through Cultural Self-inquiry

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### Abstract

The purpose of the study is to synthesize how reflective journal writing may facilitate English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) students with exploring their ethnocentric framing of learning activities. The paper is divided into four sections. The first contextualizes EFL students in zone of proximal development (ZPD) to be able to internalize learning activities, and challenges with mediating support of interlocutors or cultural artifacts. The second defines educational objectives for EFL students to acquire intercultural skills of interpreting their ethnocentric perspectives while studying internationally. The third reviews how reflective journaling has been utilized as a students' meaningful examination of L1/L2 learning practices across academia in order to delineate the ways through which EFL students can employ this tool. Finally, based on the research reviewed, this paper proposes some ways to encourage EFL students to implement reflective journaling for interrogating their ethnocentric standpoints in light of international educational settings.

**Keywords:** *reflective (critical) L2 journaling, cultural self-engagement, ethnocentric standpoints, EFL students, international students*

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### Introduction

This academic paper focuses on examining the ways reflective journal writing may facilitate English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) students with a critical analysis of their learning practices while studying abroad. This cultural self-inquiry is performed to trace unconscious effects of ethnocentrism influencing their behavior and causing intercultural misunderstanding of these learning practices. Being aware that this problem might concern any group of learners with various sociocultural backgrounds, this paper focuses on EFL students coming from the Expanding Circle (Kachru, 2006) countries. Referring to the former Soviet Union countries as part of the Expanding Circle, Ustinova (2011) observed that Russian language functional supremacy has been ideologically supported since the Second World War era, thus limiting a number of functions that English might fulfill (p. 68). Even though international students become English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learners when studying abroad, it is crucial to reiterate that they are coming from countries where English is considered as a foreign language, rather as a second one. Following Ustinova (2011), my study examines EFL students coming from similar settings.

To gain insight into the problem, it is worth describing my own reflective meaningful language learning experience as an EFL student in doctorate program at a US university. Hopefully, this example will illustrate how various reflective practices helped me internalize my cultural standpoints to become more sensitive about linguistic, grammatical and discursive specifications of Western culture. During my doctoral studies, I was assigned to reflect on my literate practices and language teaching perspectives through second-language (L2) writing (specifically, poetic inquiry (Hanauer 2003), reflective journaling and free in-class writing). I attempted to internalize my psychological, emotional and cognitive facets, thus distinguishing the position I occupy as a member of the multicultural community. It is my formulated written "individualized sense-making" (Hanauer 2012) that critically repositioned my cultural perspective toward meaningful and collaborative practices with my international cohort, and faculty members.

In this regard, this paper seeks to synthesize how reflective journal writing may facilitate EFL students with exploring their ethnocentric framing of learning activities while studying internationally. My discussion will shed light on some possibilities for EFL students to become sophisticated intercultural observers, and reflective practitioners, capable of interpreting their ethnocentric assumptions. Those possibilities may build a substantial ground for developing skills necessary to become intercultural mediators (Byram 1997; Elizarova 2001).

Hence, the paper proceeds as follows. Firstly, sociocultural theory of learning (Vygotsky 1978), coupled with intercultural educational objectives, is used to interpret EFL students in the zone of intercultural development (Fig.1) and how they deal with learning activities and challenges. With the idea of decoding learning documents (assignments or instructions) and events (for instance, L1/L2 correspondence) as part of their learning practices, this framework will explain how to understand EFL students' endeavors to identify, and to analyze ethnocentric perspectives (Byram 1997), proportionally provoking cultural interpretations, and revisiting deeply anchored cultural values.

Then, the discussion will review reflective journaling as a learning tool to establish students' efficacy for meaningful self-examination by scrutinizing their L1/L2 learning practices. The following four thematic subsections systematize what is known about productivity of reflective journals for meaningful self-exploration of any group of students: (1) addressing personal and cultural unconscious beliefs and assumptions, (2) analyzing sophistication levels in reflective journals, (3) applying specific skills for reflective journaling, and (4) journal writing according to guided instructions. The review findings are organized in the feature matrix (Fig. 2) to present what features of reflective journals are currently utilized as mediating instructional tools for students' self-engagement in the learning practices.

Finally, the study implicates how reflective journaling may be utilized to identify and interpret ESL students' ethnocentric viewpoints through their rigorous cultural self-examination.

## **An Overview of Semiotic Mediation and ZPD in the Sociocultural Theory**

### **Semiotic Mediation**

Generally, sociocultural theory rests on the premise that learning is mediated in social and cultural interactions with the intermediary of semiotic or physical tools (artifacts, signs), thus modifying the nature and dynamics of those relations (Lantolf 2000; Vygotsky 1962, 1978) accordingly. From the sociocultural perspective, when a person interacts with the outer world, he/she mediates his/her understanding of this interaction through various signs, and artifacts. As Lantolf (2000) suggests, individuals may integrate thinking patterns with emblematic artifacts into linguistically organized written forms by internalizing learning events (p. 13). True, culture may represent a symbolic artifact to assist students in scrutinizing their personal and cultural peculiarities, coded in shared public systems and identified through deep interpretations (Byram 1997; Geertz 1973; Elizarova 2001). Thus, Geertz (1973) defines culture as:

a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life (p. 89).

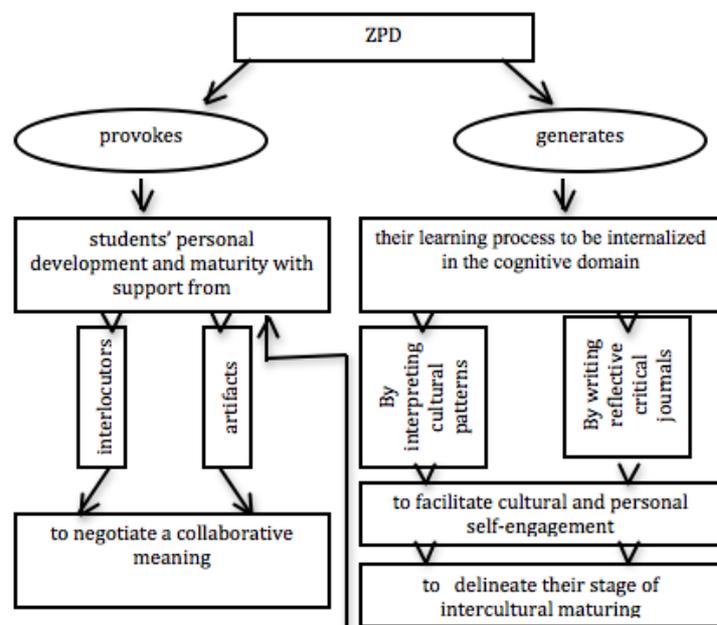
Consequently, semiotic and communicative nature of culture is saturated in cultural practices and unconsciously perceived by all its representatives (Elizarova 2001: 17). However, having problematized Geertz's concept of 'culture' as static, Byram (1997) calls for equipping students with skills of sociocultural competence. In this case, students need to critically analyze cultural instances not as monolithic, and generalized ideas, rather than as dynamic social practices, associated with critical understanding of own and other societies (Byram 1997: 19), or with "mental toolkit of subjective metaphors, affectivities, historical memories, entextualizations and transcontextualizations of experience" (Kramsch 2011: 355). With respect to language learning in an international guise, EFL learners are expected to participate in written and oral modes with the target culture, being increasingly aware of their unique cultural framing to modify their behavioral and ideological patterns accordingly. Importantly, EFL students may develop a critical perspective over time to become empathetic and sensitive towards some aspects of the target culture by engaging in their cultural self-examination. Operating this analytical framework in practice, students might become engaged in discovering their cultural voices and perceptions as well as in evaluating the differences/similarities with other cultures.

Therefore, by critical reflecting upon their discursive, rhetorical, and linguistic peculiarities in terms of motives (Lantolf 2000: 8), students may become able to revisit deeply rooted cultural frames in the face of divergent "[instructional discourse] world" (Kramsch 1993: 241). Those motives are developed within activity theory (Leontiev 1978), a visible hallmark of the sociocultural landscape. Specifically, particular goal-oriented and meaningful events encapsulate motives under certain temporal conditions by means of suitable semiotic tools (Lantolf 2000: 45). Therefore, the same endeavor may be approached differently by virtue of miscellaneous tools. Similarly, different cultures may interpret objects and ascribe motives to actions according to multilayered system of frames shared by their cultural communities (Elizarova 2001: 16 - 17). In this regard, situating multicultural students in ZPD will equip them with the necessary tools to negotiate a shared meaning with other classroom practitioners or artifacts.

### **Clarification through reflective practice in ZPD**

ZPD, originally created by Vygotsky in 1978, has become a widely adopted sociocultural constituent in international educational settings. According to Vygotsky, it is a cognitive shift that occurs, when the same person manages to accomplish certain tasks while being assisted by interlocutors, and/or mediating artifacts comparing when acted independently (p. 33). In the face of receiving assistance from other people or cultural artifacts, when entering his/her ZPD, the student (the apprentice) starts interrogating his/her own historical, sociocultural, and linguistic idiosyncrasies (Lantolf 2000; Meira & Lerman 2001; Vygotsky 1978).

The following denotative graph (Figure 1) represents how students' ZPD activates mental processes to establish dialogical relations with personal/cultural selves, thus illuminating their dynamic developmental cycles to construct potentially a shared meaning with the target.



**Figure 1:** Denotative representation of ZPD in relation to EFL students' self-engagement

As a result, sociocultural theory considers learning as a semiotic conduit through which learners stimulate their metacognitive planes to participate in socially mediated events, eventually constructing a collaborative meaning with the target.

With regards to the current study, this framework will naturally create and correspond with the educational process in order to reduce ethnocentric perspectives of EFL students while studying internationally. As follows, the next section seeks to tie sociocultural understanding of learning with intercultural meaningful educational objectives. These are the aims, which unpack the reasons of articulating intercultural skills of interpreting students' ethnocentric standpoints to give them an objective account, thus establishing "unconscious effects of ethnocentrism" (Byram 1997: 52) in reflective writing.

## Intercultural skills of interpreting ethnocentric standpoints defined in terms of educational objectives

As previously stated, sociocultural understanding of learning objectives by EFL students while studying abroad via a set of educational objectives necessary for acquiring intercultural skills of interpreting ethnocentric perspectives. I limit the discussion to conceptualizing intercultural educational goals in relation with EFL students' learning experience while study abroad. Due to space constraints, I have to leave out conceptual analyses of concepts like 'study abroad' in relation to idiosyncratic intercultural understanding of these students.

The intercultural skill of interpreting and relating is a constituent of the diagrammatic model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), proposed by Byram (1997). Originally, the framework consists of five dimensions (i.e. skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, knowledge, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness) that formulate ICC in various learning modes and among different demographic groups to become intercultural mediators (Byram 1997; Elizarova 2001; Kramsch 1998). As Elizarova (2001) suggests, a mediator of cultures is an individual being able to go beyond his/her cultural boundaries to acquire skills of interpreting aspects of other cultures without losing his/her cultural identity (p. 7). Therefore, learners need abilities to situate themselves within cultural boundaries for creating empathetic relations with other cultures. In this regard, EFL students, when studying in English abroad, may find themselves under pressure absorbing enormous amounts of cultural information, sometimes unable to discover the streams of thoughts and impact of the events that they are to enter. Therefore, students prerequisite skills of interpreting and relating to 'read' documents (e.g. syllabi, assignments) and events (e.g. L1/L2 or L2/L2 classroom discussions, presentations, correspondence) originated in other cultures, in order to interpret and correlate these literacy practices with counterparts from their own (Byram 1997: 61).

According to Byram (1997), educational objectives for teaching the skills of interpreting and relating should be considered for students to be able to:

1. identify ethnocentric perspectives in a document or event and explain their origins;

2. identify areas of misunderstanding (e.g. use of genres in inappropriate situations) and dysfunction (e.g. unconscious response to unfamiliar non-verbal behavior, overgeneralization from examples) in an interaction and explain them in terms of each of the cultural systems present;
3. mediate between conflicting interpretations of phenomena (e.g. identify common ground and unresolvable difference) (52).

To stay in focus, the discussion will draw upon these issues in a way to review how EFL students can evaluate their cultural self-engagement as an indicator of readiness, openness, and intercultural maturity for mediating learning documents and events when studying abroad.

In the section to follow, the discussion will examine reflective journaling as a conduit for measuring students' cultural self-examination for appropriate and adequate interaction with the target culture. Consequently, I will delineate the ways in which EFL students might utilize the tool for critically examining their ethnocentric stances, while maintaining their multicultural nature.

## Grounding theory behind reflective journaling

Dewey's (1933) and Kolb's (1984) frameworks have been quoted in numerous academic studies as grounding theories for implementing reflective journaling as a learning medium in educational settings (Greiman 2007; Johansen 2005; Issa et al 2012; Stevens & Cooper 2009; Ussher & Chalmers 2011). Originally, Dewey (1933) defines reflection not as a mere sequence of idle ideas and beliefs, but as a properly organized consequence of those to discover evidence to be admitted (pp. 1 – 5). Then, Kolb (1984) determines that reflection facilitates a learning cycle in gaining new knowledge by means of reapplying and evaluating basic assumptions (p. 21). Of all reflective theorists, Mezirow (1981) gears toward critical reflectivity to investigate deeply rooted frames of reference, so-called "meaning schemes" that individuals passively conceived earlier in life without explicit linkage to the world-view. He argues that this type of existing knowledge shapes the learning process, and emancipates the individual from unconscious webs of taken-for-granted assumptions. In other words, Dewey (1933) and Kolb (1984) define reflection in terms of problem solving activities, but Mezirow (1981) strongly believes in its enriched effectiveness by means of transformative learning practices. Hence, those theoretical endeavors may provide a pathway to discuss reflective written practices in two possible ways. First, such written practices may stimulate students' self-analysis of ethnocentric effects detected in interaction with intercultural artifacts and interlocutors. Second, they may facilitate the process of intercultural maturity permitting learners to meaningfully comprehend emerging purposes and circumstances in order to act based on them.

Prior to discussing reflective journals in terms of developing intercultural skills of interpreting and relating, it is worth defining a reflective model used within the spectrum of the current paper. In this paper, reflective practices are understood as "reflections on actions" (Morrison 1996: 318). With regards, reflective journals may serve as forums to record and accumulate raw data within specific educational areas (Andrew 2011; Genc 2010; Greiman & Covington 2007; Johansen 2005; Stevens & Cooper 2009). In the scope of the current study, those particular areas are critical for identifying ethnocentric motives, interpreting intercultural differences, and relating relevant aspects from different cultural backgrounds:

- objectives and how these have been addressed and achieved;
- expectations, attitudes, values, beliefs, knowledge, skills;
- significant events, reflections, decisions, insights, evaluations, views;
- comments on the relationships between academic performance and personal self-actualization;
- changes and developments in professional practice (like reinterpreting professors' assignments and intentions in light of new cultural experiences and personal ethnocultural changes). (Morrison, 1996: 323).

Supposedly, such orientations will interpret ideological and cultural schemes through reflective writing conceived from a critical perspective. As Canagarajah (2002) states, a critical understanding of writing will determine "the value-ridden nature of its construction" (p. 4) to situate it as an analytical and mediated entity. Therefore, students are expected not to mirror their academic expectations, events, views, evaluations and perceptions, rather to interrogate the learning practices by examining their cultural constraints (Andrew 2011; Spinthourakis 2007; Zahra 2009) and subjective perspectives (Genc 2010; Greiman & Covington 2007; Johansen 2005; Issa et al 2012; Ussher & Chalmers 2011; Watson 2010). Consequently, reflective critical journaling may be understood as a self-generated writing activity to clarify the rationale of every action or thought performed (Bain et al 1999; Stevens & Cooper 2009; Ussher & Chalmers, 2011).

It is also important to outline criteria for assessing reflective efficacy. Those criteria represent sophistication levels in writing with concurring taxonomies (Bain et al 1999; Hattan & Smith 1995). Specifically, 'Five Point Reflection scale' (Bain et al 1999: 60) ranges from descriptive ("retells . with no added .insights") (Level 1) to reconstructing reflection (" .internalizes the personal significance of their learning and/or plans for further learning on the basis of their reflections") (Level 5) (p. 60). When evaluating participants' characteristics of writing, Hattan & Smith (1995) identify four styles: descriptive writing, descriptive reflection, dialogical reflection, and critical reflection. Both research cases clarify that

critical reflection style corresponds to participants' open-mindedness and systematic interrogation of learning practices. Some studies (Genc 2010; Greiman & Covington 2007; Issa et al 2012; Ussher & Chalmers 2011; Watson 2010) empirically illustrate how students gain a deep critical insight (critical reflection style of writing) into their learning experiences.

The following section delineates possible ways for incorporating reflective journals into EFL students' international learning settings with the purpose of exploring and interrogating students' ethnocentric standpoints.

## **Literature review of utilizing reflective journaling as a medium for self-engagement**

Since there has been a scarcity of recent research in applying reflective journals for language teaching in intercultural perspective (Andrew 2011; Genc 2010; Ussher & Chalmers 2011), studies from other disciplines such as general postgraduate education (Issa et al 2012), music education (Baker 2007), administrative education (Watson 2010), elementary education (Spinthourakis 2007), social education (Johansen 2005), higher education (Greiman & Covington 2007), tourism and hospitality education (Zahra 2009) were reviewed. Later on, I endeavor to apply the findings discovered in relation to EFL students' skills of cultural self-inspection in international educational settings.

As follows, the following synthesis is organized around four thematic sub-sections to reveal how reflective journals could facilitate EFL students with cultural and personal self-exploring. Those sub-categories are as follows: (1) addressing personal and cultural unconscious beliefs and assumptions, (2) analyzing sophistication levels in reflective journals, (3) applying specific skills for reflective journaling, and (4) writing according to guided instructions.

### **Addressing personal and cultural unconscious beliefs and assumptions**

Previous research advocated reflective journal writing for facilitating students to acknowledge and correlate learning behaviors with their unconscious "mental schemes" (Mezirow 1981, 1990). The schemes may be filtered on the levels of professional, personal or cross-cultural performance. With regards to the level of professional performance, reflective journaling may activate students' mental schemas to facilitate professional development not by passive writing, rather than internalizing academic concepts (Baker 2007; Watson 2010; Issa et al 2012), inspecting teaching practices by foreign language (Genc 2010) and high school (Ussher & Chalmers 2011) pre-service teachers on a weekly basis. For instance, methodologically wise, Watson (2010) reports about the academic writing course with the target group of first- and second-year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) students (N=25), during which the participants were required to keep reflective journals for six weeks. Interestingly enough, during the entire process (especially, when introducing reflective journaling [Week 2]), they received guidelines, and feedback to recycle professional knowledge and skills in follow-up academic writing. In this case, the researcher was able to construct the study as a consistent reflective practice, as "appreciative system" (p. 13) that included tutorial interactions, group discussions, and extensive writing instructions. The actual process of reflective journaling in Watson's (2010) study seems quite applicable, because the students interpreted learning experiences consistently and profoundly. However, if cultural unconscious beliefs and assumptions about own learning/teaching practices were included, these students would internalize the gap not only in professional, but also in cultural terms. Hence, the current study, built on Watson's (2010) findings, seeks to facilitate EFL students' with autonomous reflective practices that they would be willing to do for the sake of uncovering their ethnocentric premises.

Conceived from another research angle, Andrew (2011) investigates students' self-commitment by linking current personal perceptions to their autoethnographic experience (Pavlenko 2007) during the community placement journal project. Andrew (2011) discovers how critical reflective journaling assists second-year Bachelor of Arts (EAL) students (N=40) of various ethnocultural backgrounds in scrutinizing differences between their own and Kiwi cultures (i.e. communication styles and strategies, ways of behaving and socializing, and other surprises) through acts of written re-creation, and reflecting on their language socialization and cultural investments. Contrary to Watson (2010), Andrew analyzes how learners embody learning, and literacy practices in their out-of-school settings, by presenting cultural observations as heterogeneous in nature. In other words, their observations were tied with their unique meaning making practices.

Johansen (2005) and Spinthourakis (2007) enact the same research idea by contrasting students' experiences with one another, taken into account the extent of their self-exploration. In other words, the researchers internalize the process of self-inquiry on the basis of contrastive analysis. Indeed, Johansen (2005) empirically constructs a collaborative deep-learning environment in the Web CT program to inspect how students reflected on personal frames of reference by comparing them with alternative perspectives. Accordingly, Spinthourakis (2007) discovers that dialogical reflective journals enhanced the extent of self-engagement in order to recapture personal cultural peculiarities to construct a shared cross-cultural meaning.

Based on the literature examined, I believe that the conceptual focus of encountering reflective journals in academic settings may be shifted from conquering the level of assessment (Issa et al 2012) to the level of individualized self-exploration in particular cultural situations in line with personal linguocultural meaning making (Andrew 2011), but still keeping them in the dialogical format (Johansen 2005; Spinthourakis 2007; Watson 2010).

## Analyzing sophistication levels in writing reflective journals

As previously stated, there are five levels of sophistication to analyze the depth of reflexivity in writing (Bain et al 1999) by means of discourse and logical analyses. Hence, some studies (Genc 2010; Greiman & Covington 2007; Issa et al 2012; Ussher & Chalmers 2011; Watson 2010) inspect the sophistication level in reflective journal writing that symbolizes the extent of students' rigorous self-engagement. For instance, Ussher & Chalmers (2011) claim that 19 (out of 50) reflective entries hardly represent the lower levels (2 or 3) performed in a narrative or descriptive manner. However, the other researchers established the reverse empirical results of using reflective journals. Consequently, critical reflective writing (Level 5) fosters their conscious understanding of teaching and personal beliefs (Genc 2010), their cognitive activities to be correlated with teaching practices (Greiman & Covington 2007, Issa et al 2012; Watson 2010) in order to become meaningfully self-engaged during their educational journeys. Consequently, the purpose of implementing this tool into teaching extensively depends on teachers' agenda. If the purpose is to critically reflect on learning/literacy/cultural practices for sake of changing language and instructional policies, the instructors should focus on increasing the level of sophistication in writing reflective journals (Greiman & Covington 2007; Issa et al 2012; Ussher & Chalmers 2011; Watson 2010). However, if the purpose is to provide (in my case, EFL) learners with opportunities to inquiry personal ethnocentric stances in light of international educational experiences, then scholars should not feel obligated to increase the level of sophistication, rather than create a fruitful trustful atmosphere for students' self-inquiry (Andrew 2011; Genc 2010), as well as to discover new perspectives on the same phenomena (see Byram 1997) (Andrew 2011) in reflecting journaling.

## Applying specific skills for reflective journaling

In order to maximize the benefits, academicians (Andrew 2011; Genc 2010; Greiman & Covington 2007; Issa et al 2012; Ussher & Chalmers, 2011) employ complex cognitive (analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating) and affective (relating and internalizing) skills for reflective writing for mediating the process of meaningful self-inquiry. From an academic perspective, reflective journaling reinforces critical thinking, integrating and formulating skills (Genc 2010; Greiman & Covington 2007; Issa et al 2012; Watson 2010) to reevaluate mental frames of reference on a more sophisticated level. For instance, Issa et al (2012) demonstrates how postgraduate students managed to synthesize multipurpose research activities through reflective writing (p. 245). By virtue of reflective journaling the students in Watson's (2010) were able to conceptualize the expository method on various stages ("It [reflective journaling] forces me to look beyond what I think I know"; "Reading my journal entry paints a picture of how I see the method in relation to what it is"; "Journaling forces me to take responsibility for my learning" (p. 17)). Moreover, based on the empirical evidence, the participants emphasized that reflective journals facilitate applying new knowledge, and improving academic writing skills.

From a cross-cultural perspective, reflective writing fosters students to apply relating, contrasting, and revising skills of cross-cultural aspects (Andrew 2011; Spinthourakis 2007) in relation to the academic, and personal experiences. With regards to the target group, I believe that this body of literature neglects possibilities of integrating academic and cross-cultural perspectives in reflective journaling for encouraging EFL students to become self-sustained multilingual/multicultural practitioners of new international communities they are entering. To accomplish this goal, students should be considered not as deficient, but as sensible and multicultural in new compelling cross-cultural circumstances. Hopefully, reflective journaling penetrated with intercultural skills of interpreting and relating (Byram 1997) might become the case.

## Writing according to guided instructions

Pedagogically wise, a structured way of incorporating reflective journals facilitates the students' deepest self-perceptions in analyzed academic studies. Specifically, the participants become able to systematize the reflective practice and to speed the engagement process (Genc 2010; Issa et al 2012; Ussher & Chalmers 2011; Watson 2010), and to document the gradual progression by means of analyzing readings (Baker 2007) or using digital environment (Johansen 2005). In the case of Greiman & Covington (2007), the statistical and the hermeneutic content analyses reveal a significant difference ( $M_{\text{non-prompt}} = 2.43$ ,  $M_{\text{prompt}} = 2.95$ ) on the ability to increase the level of reflexivity, following a structured manual compared with the reverse.

However, insufficient instructional composition makes Spinthourakis' (2007) and Zahra's (2009) research not fully reliable, even though they attempt to present cultural and identity dynamics within participants' behavior. Thus, such limited scope of implementing reflective journals within international educational settings is addressed in the next section.

Gleaned from the current literature review, the following feature matrix helps organize and systematize the conceived data pool extracted from abovementioned academic studies based on the corresponding criteria (Figure 2).

Articles Features	Johansen (2005)	Baker (2007)	Greiman & Covington (2007)	Spinthourakis (2007)	Ussher & Chalmers (2011)	Zahra (2009)	Genc (2010)	Watson (2010)	Andrew (2011)	Issa, Issa&Isaias (2012)
Addressing personal unconscious beliefs and assumptions	+	+		+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Addressing the sophistication level in writing reflective journals			+		+		+	+		+
Utilizing specific skills to write RJ			+	+		+	+		+	+
Writing according to guided instructions	+	+	+/-	+	+		+	+		+

**Figure 2** The matrix of structuralizing and systematizing academic articles according to specific criteria

As calculated in the matrix, even by working with instructed reflective activities in most studies, the participants in Johansen's (2005), Baker's (2007), Spinthourakis' (2007) studies obtain descriptive reflection. Specifically, Johansen and Spinthourakis achieve the scientific goals of engaging students into deep self-examination by means of contrasting their experiences with others. As for the study conducted by Baker, the participants shift in learning perspectives by using reflective narrative journaling as a supplement tool for rigorous phenomenological exploration.

However, as indicated in the matrix, features like *Addressing the sophistication level in writing reflective journals* (5 out of 11 studies) and *Utilizing specific skills to write RJ* (4 out of 11) have not been extensively implemented through reflective journaling to trigger students' critical and reflective self-inspection in the learning process.

Consequently, the evidence necessitates guided reflective critical journaling activities to reconsider taken-for-granted "meaning schemes" in order to initiate an inquiry-based personality and literacy development. Those empirical results generate some suggestions on how to implement guided reflective journaling activities to improve intercultural skills of interpreting and relating learning events or documents in learning settings.

As follows, the section to follow suggests some implications from other academic disciplines in order to establish a comfortable and trust-based atmosphere in learning settings filled with EFL students. With that, students may become appropriately instructed and equipped to internalize their ethnocentric perspectives.

## Suggestions for incorporating reflecting critical journals into international educational programs

This conceptual analysis suggests that reflective critical journals may facilitate students' rigorous self-investigation while studying abroad. Hence, there are four critical findings to consider in the context of international programs for examining ethnocentric standpoints of EFL students when dealing with learning events or documents. However, these findings could be also applicable in a broader educational spectrum with other groups of students.

First, EFL students may trigger their self-assessment by writing reflective journals to prevent themselves from being subjective about learning events or documents of another culture. As stated, "meaningful schemes" (Mezirow 1981), deeply rooted frames of reference, shape students' learning process. Generally, students interpret learning assignments or

practices with their subjective ethnocentric account. It is worth mentioning that EFL students face enormous amount of problems because of insufficient cross-cultural experience in their home countries. For example, the academic article assigned to an international class, may activate divergent interpretations for EFL students comparing with L1 counterparts. Therefore, EFL students may feel neglected perceiving and discussing the problem from another academic angle, and having no common cultural references to rely on. At some point, students, being unaware of ethnocentric effects this situation might provoke, start building prejudices and stereotypes during the interaction revolved around this academic paper. Presumably, EFL students may devalue their sociocultural background as not reliable and valid for the class majority (L1 or ESL classmates). For effective transformation of ethnocentric perspectives the process of students' cultural self-engagement may be organized by contrasting it with peer's experiences (Johansen 2005; Spinthourakis 2007) or by measuring rigorously their phenomenological evidence (Baker 2007; Genc 2010; Issa et al 2012; Ussher & Chalmers 2011; Watson 2010) in reflective journaling.

Second, activating metacognitive and affective skills for reflective writing mediate the process of meaningful self-engagement as they help maximize students' abilities to study their cultural entity in depth and to expand their potential to think critically. Some scholars (Andrew 2011; Genc 2010; Greiman & Covington 2007; Issa et al 2012; Spinthourakis 2007) empirically show that reflective journaling encapsulates critical thinking, integrating and formulating skills to revisit mental frames of reference on a more sophisticated level. Thus, in the situation described above, EFL students may find the rationale of having uncomfortable feelings by describing the situation in a detached critical manner, and by identifying the cultural roots of misunderstanding. Here, living through the moment of cross-cultural negotiation becomes crucial for affirming diversity of perspectives. Such a hermeneutic approach might help in modifying already existed epistemologies.

Third, assessing L2 writing sophistication levels and corresponding taxonomies in writing will indicate students' extent of self-engagement. Indeed, critical reflective journaling (Level 5) (Bain et al 1999; Hartman & Smith 1995) provokes to reevaluate personal and professional beliefs (Genc 2010), cognitive activities (Greiman & Covington 2007, Issa et al 2012; Watson 2010) to become meaningfully self-engaged into the educational process. If to go back to the example with EFL students described above, by (self) examining the sophistication level in reflective journaling, they may analyze the extent to which they are capable of describing the situation in a detached critical manner, thus identifying the cultural roots of misinterpretation.

Fourth, writing reflective journals according to guided instructions may systematize a new body of academic knowledge for EFL students. Pedagogically speaking, a structured way of using reflective journals may facilitate the students with deeper self-perceptions by means of outlining temporal and special limits (Baker 2007; Issa et al 2012; Ussher & Chalmers 2011; Watson 2010), by sharing academic or cultural expectations (Spinthourakis 2007), or by providing a writing prompt to follow (Greiman & Covington 2007). However, I believe it is also crucial to humanize this way of using reflective journals, as students have their own linguistic and sociocultural idiosyncrasies that need to be encountered. Therefore, instead of imposing temporal/special limits for journaling, educators may establish a reliable, and comfortable atmosphere by guiding students through a process of cultural self-discovery, based on the features identified.

Finally, visualizing the process of cultural self-exploration through reflective critical journaling provides EFL students with opportunities to rationalize their ethnocentric behavior, but also to explain alternative ways to interpret the same phenomena (learning assignments, syllabi components, discussions, written correspondence) in international educational settings, when shared with/heard by other classroom practitioners.

## Limitations

Although the study reveals benefits of implementing reflective journaling for interrogating ethnocentric frames of reference, instructors might face some challenges if it were implemented. For instance, it might be compelling for EFL learners to open themselves through critical reflective journaling (Gunn 2010; Zahra 2009), to invest into extensive critical writing (Johansen 2005; Zahra 2009), or to manage the amount/the quality of reflective journaling entries (Greiman & Covington 2007). Besides, the essential question still remains open regarding the system of assessing reflective journaling in the given context. It goes without saying that this reflective practice may serve as a stepping stone for students' motivation to explore their unique cultural entity and, more importantly, to share this sensitive information with other classroom practitioners. However, there is a dilemma whether such reflective critical journaling should become an assessed practice, or remain as part of students' independent writing. In the former case, grading reflective practices would organize and systematize students' self-inquiry exercises. Yet if reflective journaling remains a part of independent writing, instructors should provide opportunities for learning experience to be internalized idiosyncratically.

Ultimately, those problematic issues need to be taken into consideration while planning to incorporate reflective critical journals for identifying their ethnocentric standpoints in intercultural studies through cultural self-engagement.

## Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to explore how reflective journals may facilitate EFL students' exploration of unconscious ethnocentric perspectives through cultural self-inquiry, while studying abroad.

The theoretical assumption of the study based on the sociocultural theory of EFL learning, coupled with intercultural educational objectives to identify ethnocentric effects of their behavior in international learning practices. For that, in the zone of intercultural development, EFL students were described to internalize learning activities and challenges with mediating support of interlocutors or artifacts in order to interpret intercultural documents (assignments or instructions) and events (L1 correspondence). By analyzing their ethnocentric perspectives on the issues raised in those documents or events, students may explain their cultural references and deeply anchored values, which predispose their behavioral patterns.

Framing the study within sociocultural theory of learning, the researcher introduced reflective critical journaling as a mediating tool for acquiring intercultural skills of interpreting and relating. Based on the conceptual analysis, reflective critical journaling of L1/L2 learning practices might mediate student's meaningful self-engagement with their deeply anchored ethnocentric frames of reference. The literature review on the related topic has presented four issues discussed above, which pertained to the efficacy of using reflective journals for meaningful self-exploration of different groups of students. The empirical findings were logically organized and systematized in the feature matrix (Fig.2).

Accordingly, the research analysis further suggested that reflective journals might be implemented in international educational settings constructed in terms of sociocultural learning (Fig.1) and intercultural objectives. The purpose was to fully engage EFL students into their cultural self-exploration for identifying unconscious effects of ethnocentrism influencing their behavioral patterns.

In sum, this academic paper has highlighted the importance of using reflective critical writing by EFL students to acknowledge their culturally rooted beliefs interfering with their perception and interpretation of international educational events or documents. When students acquire intercultural skills of interpreting their ethnocentric perspectives, they become interculturally mature to mediate conflicting moments and difficulties happened in the process of communicating between cultures, communities, etc.

As a final comment, it is crucial that this kind of research be conducted in the near future. Indeed, the combination of two pedagogical aspects such as assessing components of intercultural competence and second language acquisition in international educational settings by means of reflective practices seems paramount for reducing stereotyping and ethnocentricity. Finally, the identified pedagogical insights propel the following research in the direction of covering other groups of students, who also participate in the process of intercultural communication in all fields of international educational programs.

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