

Self-reflection Revisited: Self-praise and Self-criticism in Students' Journals

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Introduction



- Self-reflection as a tool for academic and emotional growth
- Shift from language focus to emotional well-being
- Topics:
 1. Emotions in self-reflection journals
 2. How do students engage in self-praise and self-criticism?
 3. Role of self-criticism- how honest does it get?

Theoretical Framework

- Self-reflection in ELT: academic and emotional benefits
- John Dewey (1933): reflective inquiry, intentionality
- Donald Schön (1983):
 - both successes and failures
 - we can uncover valuable insights that can help us develop new skills
 - reflection in action and on action

Why reflect?

- To achieve a greater level of understanding of ourselves and our learning (Beveridge 1997)
- To foster critical thinking (Dyment and O'Connell 2010)
- To critically reflect on our experiences (Sutton et al. 2007)
- To become more autonomous in learning (Thorpe 2004)
- Higher education: medicine, nursing, psychology, teaching
Competence-based disciplines

Challenges

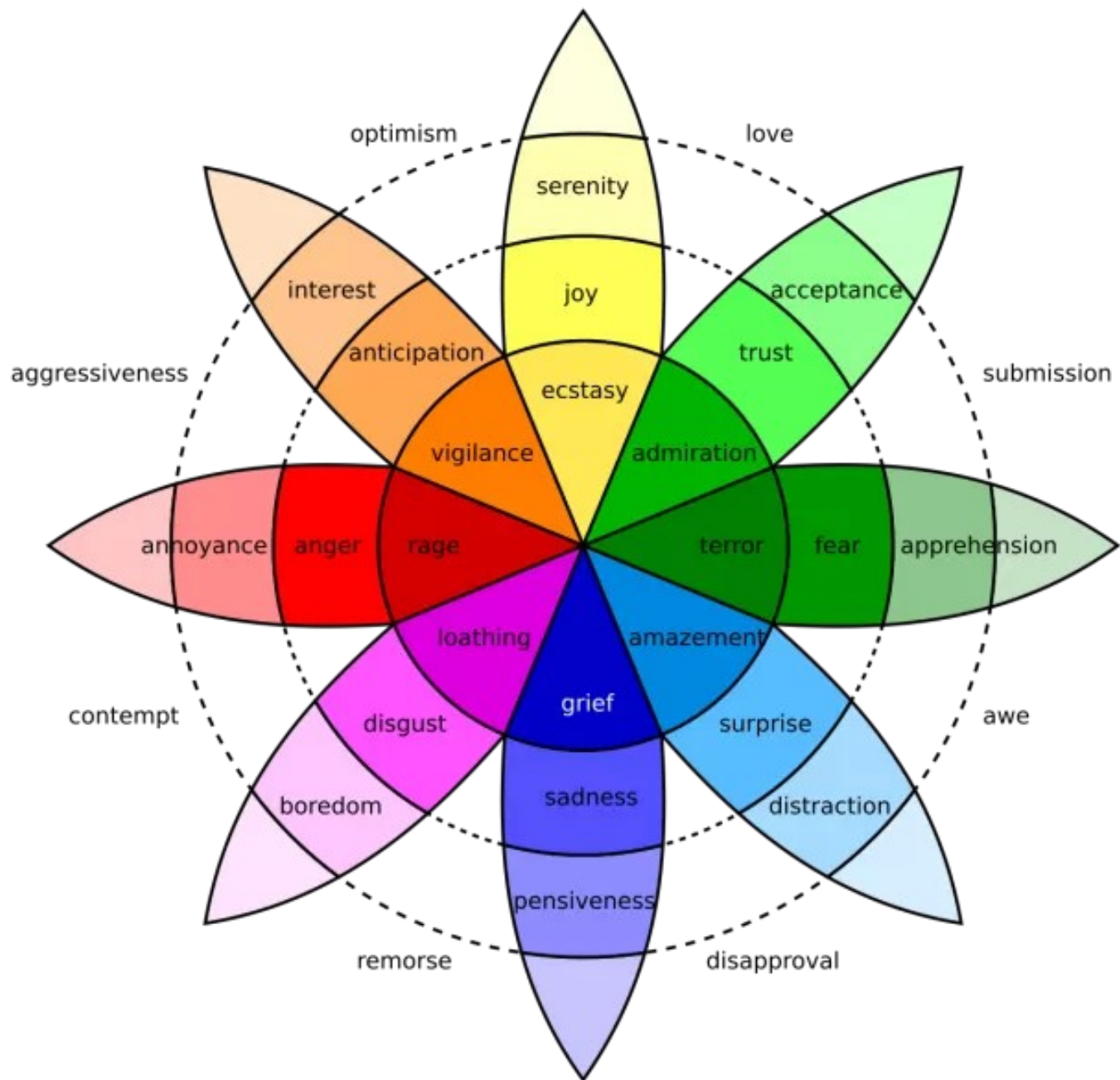
- Reflection vs. critical reflection (Power 2013)
- Students 'journaled to death' (Dyment & O'Connell, 2010)
- 'fixed modes of reflection' (Galea, 2010)
- protective self-presentation strategies (Rui & Stefanone, 2013)
- revealing only the ideas that would be looked upon favourably or manufacture strategic beliefs and opinions that comply with the assessors' views (Hobbs 2007)
- Hierarchical student-teacher relationship: students avoid boasting to prevent negative judgment.
 - Should it be measured and assessed?
- Time-consuming activity
- Cultural factors: Czech context

Material Analysed

- Context: EAP course focused on presentation skills for students of social sciences
- Master's students
- Several entries throughout the term (language learning history, SWOT analysis, goals, final reflection)
- Data: 50 self-reflection journals

Findings:

- Rare instances of (direct) self-praise
- Tendency toward self-criticism and underestimation
- Cultural & pedagogical influences on self-reflection



Positive Emotions: Feeling of Accomplishment

*“I think that it went better **than I had expected.**”*

*“I am definitely **less anxious** about speaking out loud in public.”*

*“**I think** this course was really useful for me and my presentation skills.”*

*“I am **glad** that it gets better with each attempt.”*

Positive Emotions: Determination

*“I am definitely less anxious about speaking out loud in public. But I still cannot stand improvisation. Maybe **I need to practice speaking out loud more** and be more confident.”*

*“To conclude, the whole course gave me more confidence and **I believe that I will be motivated** to go on with learning English and to get better in the future.”*

- Plans based on their performance, plans at the end of the term

Positive Emotions: Relief and Gratitude

“I was happy that it was the last assignment and I could finish my exam period.”

*“I realized recorded presentations suit me better than live ones. **I felt relief** that I didn’t have to face a live audience.”*

*“I am very **happy**, the course was really nice and supportive.”*

- Gratitude to classmates and peers and the teacher

Negative Emotions: Anxiety

*“Standing in front of the class, I hadn’t anticipated the **anxiety** that would grip me. My palms felt clammy, and my heart raced.”*

*“I get **nervous** when I know someone in the room; I feel I am a better speaker to the audience I do not know.”*

*“To begin with, I must admit that I have never experienced such **paralyzing nervousness** in my life as I did today at improvisation.”*

*“Despite knowing my topic well and preparing thoroughly, **nerves got me**. Speaking into a camera felt oddly intimate as if the lens could see right through my anxiety.”*

Negative Emotions: Frustration

*“Oh god, what a piece of awn! I postponed it as long as possible. I **really didn’t want to do it at all.**”*

*“Sadly, the mini-presentation was a disaster. I managed to come up with a nice and fruitful topic... but I **felt so stupid and sick of it.**”*

“On the way home, I was still thinking about what I could have said differently and what I had forgotten.”

Negative Emotions: Shame and Embarrassment

*“I don’t feel comfortable watching my own presentation; I **cringe** at every mistake.”*

*“I misunderstood the assignment, which is why I only had 6 slides. I **felt shame**, but I didn't show it during the presentation.”*

“Sometimes I don’t feel like saying something, especially when someone is speaking with gorgeous English and a perfect accent.”

Dealing with mistakes, tendency towards perfectionism

Self-praise

- sunshining (Thomas and Liu 2012): showcasing the best part, using buzz words

x direct self-praise is rare, it is hedged and downplayed

- *“I also gained **some** confidence in presenting because we had to do a lot of presentations, so I really had to put myself out there, and the confidence just came naturally.”*
- *“Even though I think sometimes I still struggle with the pace of my speech, I **think I improved** in this area at least **a little bit**.”*
- *“At first, I was nervous, but in the end, I managed to complete my presentation **without any major mistakes**.”*
- *“**I was surprised** that I could actually manage the Pecha Kucha format well, even though I was nervous about the time limit.”*

Self-criticism

- **negative self-assessment of students' skills**

they express dissatisfaction with their language skills

"My grammar sucks."

*"I sometimes have no clue how to pronounce correctly some words, and I feel like an **idiot.**"*

"I don't think I sounded confident at all."

"Even though I tried, I think I still talk way too fast when I present."

"I realized that I speak in a monotone voice, which could be annoying and boring to listen to."

Many students mention feelings of **fear, nervousness, and embarrassment**

Self-criticism: inadequacy

Feeling of Inadequacy

“I felt like I was just making stuff up, and it was really obvious.”

“I know my English is still not that advanced as I would like it to be.”

*“I don’t think my presentation was as good **as others**’.”*

“I feel like my presentations are always missing something, but I don’t know what.”

A tendency to **compare themselves to others** and believe they are falling short.

Self-criticism: critical to their performance

Frustration with Performance

“This presentation didn’t go as planned at all. I got confused and panicked.”

“I was thinking about my mistakes for the rest of the day.”

“I should have prepared better. I didn’t use my time well.”

“I always forget important things when I present.”

A focus on what went wrong rather than acknowledging achievements.

Self-criticism: confidence

Lack of Confidence and Self-Doubt

“I am not sure if anyone even understood what I was trying to say.”

“I was just waiting for it to be over.”

“I didn’t want to speak too much because I was afraid of making mistakes.”

“I probably should have chosen an easier topic because I didn’t explain it well.”

Some students hold themselves back due to fear of **mistakes** or not being understood.

The Role of Self-Criticism

- Self-criticism as a growth tool
 - Encourages learning from mistakes and helps process frustration and build resilience

"These experiences have changed my approach to speaking and presenting in English. I now see the importance of preparing well, slowly taking on more challenging tasks, and focusing on my own improvement instead of comparing myself to others."

- Strategies to balance self-criticism with self-praise: feedback, raising awareness (mistakes)

Self-criticism as Impression Management (McGarr and Gallchóir, 2020)

- Authenticity of the journals- written to be read by others/the teacher-honesty?
- Strategies
 - criticism of the performance: "I should perform at a much higher level. Therefore, that higher level is the real me."(pg. 18)
 - the trampoline effect- black-and-white thinking - there is no mediocrity hence if one is terrible, they can be brilliant on another occasion
 - camouflage – red herring

Conclusions & Implications

- Importance of **guided** reflective writing
- Emotions and well-being are a crucial part of language teaching
 - journalling as therapy
 - integrating self-reflection in ELT supports academic & emotional growth
- Self-praise and self-criticism are two sides of one coin (McGarr and Gallchóir, 2020)
- Teacher's expectations
- Future directions and practical applications

