

## **An Analysis of How In-service EFL Teachers Comment on Peers' Reflective Journals**

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### **Abstract**

Situated in a graduate course on dialogic reflective journal writing for in-service English as a foreign language teachers, this paper explores Japanese teachers' comment writing on their peers' reflective journal entries. Previous studies on reflective journal writing in second language teacher education have examined multiple aspects of teachers' reflective learning and have suggested that collaborative journal writing fosters teachers' introspective and analytic awareness about their pedagogical practices. However, few studies have explored the collaborative process of reflective journal writing. Focusing on peer comment writing in collaborative reflective journal writing, this study examines 1) what the structure and types of comments are and 2) how the teachers engaged in comment writing to their peers' reflective journals. Drawing on four teachers' written comments and interview data, it was found that their comments typically involved a shared structure: a) set phrases, b) non-critical comments, and finally c) critical comments. Their comment writing process involved negotiation between their previous habits of advice giving and the expectations of the class and navigation of sociocultural norms. The discussion suggests the necessity of context-specific awareness and that increasing scaffolding of difficulties arising from sociocultural factors may help more teachers make the most of written reflective collaboration.

**Keywords:** Reflective Practice, Journal Writing, Philosophical Hermeneutics, In-service Teachers, Second Language Teacher Education

In the endeavor of making the most of the power of reflective practice, language teacher educators and teachers have implemented various tools and forms of reflection. One prevalent method of reflective practice in second language teacher education (SLTE) and professional development (PD) is writing reflective journals. Reflective journals have been widely employed to prompt and foster teachers' critical awareness of their teaching practice and theory (e.g., Abednia et al., 2013; Dragas, 2019; Golombek & Doran, 2014; Mann & Walsh, 2017; Yoshihara et al., 2020). Writing allows teachers to have individual space and time in which they can organize and verbalize their thoughts, which encourages introspective and careful analysis about pedagogical theory, principles and philosophy they possess (Farrell, 2020). Employing readily available online tools, written forms of reflection can be easily shared with

colleagues, supervisors, and teacher trainers and educators, and are used in collaborative and dialogic reflective practice.

While many past studies (e.g., Farrell, 2006; Farrell & Ives, 2015; Golombek & Doran, 2014; Yoshihara et al., 2020; Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2018) have reported on and contributed to developing effective reflective practice involving writing, this paper focuses on the collaborative and dialogic aspect of reflective journal writing. Specifically, this paper examines how in-service EFL teachers enrolled in a graduate program in Japan engage in giving written comments on their peers' reflective journals. The research is situated in a course featuring dialogic reflective journal writing in an M.A. program exclusively for in-service EFL teachers. During the course, six experienced in-service teachers shared weekly reflective journals describing and analyzing their daily teaching experiences, and they also offered comments on their peers' entries. This study explores the structure and characteristics of their comments, and further examines how the teachers engaged in their experiences of writing comments to their peers.

### **Reflective Journal Writing**

In reflective practice, writing has been a widely employed form of reflection. Farrell (2020) explained that the act of writing essentially involves a reflective process, as teachers are required to organize their thoughts about their experience and to choose what to write about, which prompts the process of reflection regarding their teaching practice and understanding. In other words, in order to write about an experience, teachers go through the process of paying attention to a specific classroom phenomenon, analyzing and interpreting it, negotiating their pedagogical understanding, and reconstruct the meaning of the experience. In short, as Mann and Walsh (2017) stressed, “[t]he act of writing *about* reflection equates *with* reflection” (p. 130). Compared to verbal reflective approaches such as dialogic sessions and group discussions, journal writing allows teachers to work in their own space sparing time to carefully think and analyze their classroom experiences and to create a record of their thoughts.

Reflective journal writing has been frequently employed in the field of SLTE and PD. According to Farrell's (2016) literature review of 116 studies on reflective practice in SLTE between 2009 to 2014, reflective journal writing was used as the main data source in 29 studies (25%), which was second to reflective discussions. Previous studies on reflective practice in SLTE and PD employing journal writing have examined multiple aspects of second language teachers' daily classroom experiences and practices: the content that teachers frequently expressed in their journals (e.g., Luk, 2008; Watzke, 2007; Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2018), the challenges involved in the classroom practices (e.g., Golombek & Doran, 2014; Yoshihara et al., 2020), and teachers' beliefs and understanding about their teaching practices (e.g., Farrell, 2006; Farrell & Ives, 2015; Moodie, 2016). These studies have described what classroom experiences teachers are attentive to in their reflective process, how they describe and interpret such experiences, what meaning they make out of them, and how they engage in the meaning-making.

At the same time, in the current trend of critically reconsidering reflective practice as a standard SLTE and PD activity, researchers have also explored how reflective journal writing is perceived by teachers engaging in reflective practice. These studies have suggested it is not enough to simply assign teachers journal writing activities. For example, Zulfikar and Mujiburrahman's (2018) study in a US graduate program reported that novice EFL/ESL teachers tended to value reflective journal writing less than teachers with more than three years of professional experience. One of the novice teachers in this study shared that she found journal writing ineffective, as the teachers did not seem to be honest about themselves in their journals. Also, Abednia et al. (2013) examined how Iranian in-service EFL teachers' perceived

advantages and challenges of reflective journal writing, and reported that, while the teachers found their reflective awareness and skills were developed, they shared a necessity of more scaffolding in the structural aspect of journal writing process. Several more studies similarly argued that sufficient scaffolding needs to be offered to guide teachers' reflective process in the application of reflective journal writing (e.g., Johnson & Golombek, 2010; Luk, 2008). These studies have suggested that, while journal writing is one of the common means of reflective practice, there need to be certain procedural and structural supports to effectively promote teacher engagement in the reflective process.

One of the long-time premises of reflective practice is that the reflective process should be collaborative and dialogic in order to help teachers negotiate and co-construct an intersubjective understanding about their pedagogical practice, theory, principle, and philosophy (e.g., Dewey, 1916/1944; Dragas, 2019; Farrell, 2014, 2015, 2020; Johnson & Golombek, 2010; Mann & Walsh, 2017; Rodgers, 2002, 2020; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Researchers (e.g., Abednia et al., 2013; Dragas, 2019) have argued that written forms of reflection should contain collaborative, critical checks and lenses so that teachers can avoid concluding their meaning making merely within their individual subjectivity. These studies suggest that dialogue with outside perspectives can prompt developing new insights about teaching and learning. Therefore, although reflective journal writing itself is an individual action, previous studies have encouraged practitioners to integrate collaborative and dialogic structure into the reflective process.

Meanwhile, however, there has been a scarcity of research paying attention to the aspect of collaboration in the written form of reflection. More specifically, past research has not sufficiently explored what it is like for teachers to engage in the process of comment writing involved in collaborative reflective journal writing and how teachers engage in the process. Therefore, building on previous studies of reflective journal writing in the field of SLTE, this research project focuses on the collaborative and dialogic aspects of reflective journal writing by exploring how experienced Japanese EFL teachers develop their comments on peers' reflective journal entries. Specifically, this study examines the following research questions:

- 1) What are the structure and types of the peer comments?
- 2) How did the teachers engage in comment writing on their peers' reflective journals?

## Methods

This research was situated in a graduate program of English language teaching in a Japanese public university. The graduate program is exclusively for in-service EFL teachers and has set reflective practice as one of its core curriculum themes since its foundation in 2004. The program offers semester-long courses on Friday evening and Saturday as well as intensive courses during summer and spring breaks. The students in the program are required to be teaching English in some capacity throughout the program. Most students in the program teach in public and private primary and secondary schools, while others teach in English language schools and community language programs. Most of the graduate students are full-time EFL teachers, but a few teach part-time.

Taking what previous studies have suggested into consideration, a semester-long reflective journal writing course, in which I was the instructor, was developed. Framing teachers as researchers of their classroom practices, the course followed three conditions for effective reflective practice stressed by Mann and Walsh (2017, p. 31):

- 1) the research takes place in the classroom,
- 2) teacher-researchers reflect and act on what they observe, and
- 3) understandings emerge through dialogue.

The following section explains the detail about theoretical foundations of the reflective journal

writing activity referring to the actual procedure that students went through in the course.

## Participants

To answer the research questions of this study, the data needed to come from those who have experienced collaborative reflective journal writing in a collaborative setting. Four in-service English teachers out of six, Ms. Tajima, Ms. Hirano, Ms. Yamada, Ms. Saito (all pseudonyms), who had completed the journal writing course in the spring semester of the 2024 academic year agreed to be the research participants. The recruitment process followed the procedure approved by the ethics review board of the author's university. The participants were all female, and are L1 Japanese L2 English users. They were in the first year of their graduate program and were taking multiple courses together along with the focal journal writing course. While there were two other teachers enrolled in the course, they were excluded from the recruitment process, as they, for various reasons, did not consistently write comments on their peers' journal entries. Figure 1 below shows the basic demographic information about each participant.

**Table 1. Basic Demographic Information about the Participants**

Name	Gender	Age	Teaching Experience	School Context	Class size	Weekly Hours
Ms. Tajima	F	40	12 years	Prefectural high school	Over 40 students	17 hours
Ms. Hirano	F	48	18 years	National secondary school	Over 30 students	15 hours
Ms. Honda	F	55	26 years	Private high school	20~40 students	15 hours
Ms. Saito	F	73	28 years	Community program	Less than 20 students	6 hours

The expectations for English classes differed according to each school context. In the demographic questionnaire, Ms. Tajima and Ms. Hirano, who were teaching at highly academic schools, shared that they were required not only to teach fluency/intelligibility-focused communicative English skills, which national English education policy suggests, but also to develop accuracy-focused English knowledge and skills so that their students could succeed in college entrance exams. Ms. Honda had more control in what to focus on her classes compared to Ms. Tajima and Ms. Hirano while she was also expected to follow the policy. On the other hand, Ms. Saito, who was teaching at a community program for seniors, did not need to follow educational policies, and could develop the scope and sequence of her courses on her own. In the program she was teaching at, the students, who were all over 70 years old, chose courses according to their purposes of learning English such as guiding foreign tourists around local temples and shrines. Ms. Saito oversaw a tourist guide course and basic conversation courses weekly.

Reflective practice was new to most of the participants prior to the journal writing course, which was one of the first courses they were enrolled in in the graduate program. Ms. Tajima, Ms. Honda, and Ms. Saito answered that they rarely have had an opportunity to reflect on their teaching with colleagues at their schools. While Ms. Honda said she has chances to be observed by her colleagues, she said she never received critical comments about her teaching. Ms. Hirano was the only participant who answered that there were many opportunities for collaborative reflection with colleagues. Her school had an active professional development program that organized workshops and practical report sessions open to neighboring schools a few times a year. In that context, teachers in the school often discussed their teaching practices and shared

questions and struggles with each other and with teachers in other schools nearby.

### **Theoretical Foundations of the Reflective Journal Writing Course**

As the theoretical foundation of the reflective journal writing course, I employed Gadamer's (1989/2004) philosophical hermeneutics, in which human understanding is conceptualized as life-long transformation of preconceptions through experiential and dialogic process. While the process of collaborative reflection is often supported by sociocultural theory (e.g., Dragas, 2019; Johnson & Golombek, 2011), I found that the notions in philosophical hermeneutics, and more specifically, the concepts of *genuine dialogue* and *a fusion of horizon* provided meaningful theoretical implications to collaborative reflective practice (Yagata, 2018). In philosophical hermeneutics, Gadamer (1989/2004) proposed that understanding is equivalent to interpretation, and interpretation is a result of dialogue between oneself and the world such as others, texts, and phenomena. For dialogue to be genuine, Gadamer stressed that the structure of questions and answers is crucial, as it helps engage with otherness and increase the possibility of bringing a new meaning out of an experience (Trede et al., 2008). Putting one's understanding into play with others', s/he can reach new understanding, which Gadamer (1989/2004) called *a fusion of horizon*.

Following Gadamer's notions, I framed reflective journal writing as a dialogic meaning negotiation and making process, in which the students put their subjectivity into play and reach new understanding about the classroom experiences they chose to write about. The reflective journal writing activity was designed to ensure multiple opportunities of internal and external dialogue. First, I instructed students to choose a classroom experience every week that they found meaningful to explore, to describe the experience with its contextual information, and their own interpretations of the experience in their journal entries. The journal entries were shared online, and the students were assigned to comment to all other classmates' journal entries. Here, I stressed that they should provide questions and different interpretations rather than sharing judgmental feedback and/or suggestions to respect the fact each of their interpretations are developed in different classroom contexts and through different backgrounds and beliefs. I, as a collaborator in their reflective practice, also wrote comments in each of the journal entries. Finally, students were instructed to read the comments they received from their peers open-mindedly. By doing so, I expected students to engage in three-phases of dialogue first with themselves and then with their peers twice (writing and reading comments).

Upon developing the guidelines for reflective journal writing, I also referred to Farrell's (2020, 2022) practice-into-theory approach, with which teachers initiate the process of their reflection at their classroom practice level and connect it to recognition and reconstruction of their theory, principles, and philosophy. Considering that the students are all experienced in-service EFL teachers, I found that the practice-into-theory approach was more suitable as suggested by Farrell (2020). Furthermore, the procedural structure of journal writing followed Rodgers' (2020) notion of reflective cycle: experience, description, analysis and interpretation, and taking intelligent actions. However, the primary purpose of the journal writing was to raise awareness about unnoticed aspects of the teaching practices and classroom phenomena. As part of the graduate program, the teachers are expected to take intelligent actions according to the newly raised awareness from their classes— in this case from their interpretation and integration of the peer comments.

Although the guidelines were given, the topic of reflective journal writing was not specified other than that it has to be the writer's actual classroom experiences that they thought was meaningful to explore. As Dragas (2019) emphasized, "Teachers need to be encouraged to view knowledge through a critical but also personal lens drawing from their own experiences

and teaching contexts in order for them to construct their own meanings” (p. 140). All the students in the course teach in different educational contexts and environments, and it is likely that their challenges, struggles, and goals are different. Therefore, I intended to leave the topic open to each student. The course also included five face-to-face class meetings during the 12 weeks, in which the teachers shared their reflective thoughts developed through journal writing and clarified their questions about the contents and contexts of their peers’ journal entries.

### **Data Generation and Analysis**

The main data in this paper were the participant teachers’ written comments on peers’ journals and post-course interviews. Additionally, their reflective journal entries, course-final lived experience description papers, in-class observation, and demographic questionnaire were also used to interpret the main data.

**Written comments to journal entries.** Through the journal writing course, the four participants wrote 179 comments in total on each other’s journal entries. This number includes the comments that the participant teachers wrote for the two students who did not participate in this study but does not include any comments written by those who didn’t participate. The comments were usually written in the form of a paragraph consisting of approximately eight sentences on average. As mentioned above, the participant teachers engaged in collaborative reflective journal writing for 12 weeks. During the time, they each posted their reflective journal entries at least 10 times, and they also wrote comments to their peers’ journal entries every week. They were allowed to skip two journal entries with advance notice for the weeks they did not teach at their school (e.g., weeks of school trips, exam weeks, etc.) and/or for other extenuating circumstances, but they were still assigned to give comments to peers’ entries all 12 weeks.

The structure of each comment was carefully analyzed using a step-by-step approach. I first retrieved each participant’s comments from all journal entries, and chronologically organized them in a chart according to the receiver of the comments. Each sentence in the comments was coded in terms of the semantic functions such as empathy, praise, new interpretations, and questions. After categorizing all sentences by their semantic function, I looked for codes that seemed to form categories. I describe these categories in the findings section of this paper. Then, I analyzed the pattern of the comment structure in each participant teacher, and then in all the participant teachers.

**Post-course semi-structured interviews.** This phase of data collection and analysis were guided by van Manen’s (2014) hermeneutic phenomenology, which aims to explicate unnoticed, internal meanings of a lived experience, although this study is not purely a hermeneutic phenomenological one. After analyzing the pattern of comment structure, I conducted post-course individual semi-structured interviews. These interviews were analyzed taking into consideration van Manen’s (2014) data-interpreting hermeneutic interview, which helps to interpret empirical data, in order to explore how the participant teachers were experiencing the act of writing comments. While there were common questions that I asked to every participant (e.g., What was the toughest part of writing comments? Was there anything you were careful about when writing comments?), many questions were individualized according to the pattern and contents of their comments. In the development of interview questions, I also referred to the lived experience description papers that the participants wrote at the end of the course. The interviews were conducted two months after the course ended, and each interview took approximately one hour. In the interviews, Japanese, which is the first language for both the participants and myself, was used so that the participants could express their thoughts as accurately as possible. I present English translations of the interviews when they are used in the findings section below.

The interview data were transcribed, and sections in which the participant expressed their experience of writing comments were highlighted and analyzed thematically. Thematic analysis in human science research is “the process of recovering structures of meanings that are embodied and dramatized in human experience represented in a text” (van Manen, 2014, p. 319). Following hermeneutic phenomenology, this phase of the data analysis aimed to illustrate the intersubjective meanings of the participants’ experiences of writing comments.

The interpretive process required me to engage in critical dialogue with the participants’ artifacts (the written comments and course-final lived experience papers) and my assumptions regarding each participant and their comments. In order to avoid blindly following my subjective interpretation of the data, I also consulted with a researcher colleague about my interpretation of the data, and modified it through discussion.

## Findings

In the following section, referring to the participant teachers’ written comments and interview data, I first describe how the written comments were structured, and then demonstrate how the participants engaged in the process of comment writing focusing on how the structure of the comments was constructed. Both the written and interview statements were carefully translated from Japanese to English by the author (L1 Japanese L2 English) and reviewed by a research colleague (L1 English L2 Japanese). The teachers’ written comments involved both common patterns in the writing structures and individual variations in the contents. Such commonalities and variations derived from interacting dynamics of the participant teachers’ psychological, sociocultural and interpersonal factors.

One thing to be noted before going into the main findings is that the language (English or Japanese) that the participants used to write comments tended to align with the language that the journal entries were written in. Among six students in the course, three of them (Ms. Tajima, Ms. Hirano, and Ms. Saito) used English to write their reflective journal and the other three, including Ms. Honda, wrote in Japanese. For example, Ms. Hirano, who wrote her journal in English, wrote comments in English to Ms. Tajima and Ms. Saito and in Japanese to Ms. Honda and the other two. Ms. Honda, on the other hand, wrote comments in English to Ms. Hirano, Ms. Tajima, and Ms. Saito.

The only exception was Ms. Saito who consistently used English to write her comments. In the interview, she explained that she found journal and comment writing to be a rare opportunity for her to practice writing in English. While she also expressed a sense of apology that her comments might not have been as clear as writing them in Japanese, she kept writing in English for her own linguistic development.

While Ms. Hirano, Ms. Tajima, and Ms. Honda explained in the interview that they found it courteous to match the language to the one used in journal writing, they also expressed a preference of writing comments in English rather than Japanese. What they all shared regarding this preference was that they felt awkward about using Japanese in this context of writing critical comments.

*“I feel like it is sometimes easier to express in English. It’s like, I can be straight or it’s easier to organize my thoughts. ...When using Japanese, I would need to choose my words more carefully. ...It’s not that I can be more fluent in English, but in Japanese I can’t be frank. ...It sounds condescending when I read my Japanese comments. ‘What meaning or purpose did you have when you did this?’ I don’t usually say that in Japanese. It’s heavy. Heavy, I mean... Yeah. ...In English, I don’t think I really care about age differences.” (Ms. Tajima)*

*“In my comment writing, I was very conscious about politeness. When writing my comments to those who wrote reflective journal in Japanese, I was even more careful. I feel like written Japanese sounds heavy. So, I tried not to sound too heavy.” (Ms. Honda)*

*“I don’t think it is always easy to express my thoughts in Japanese. It is difficult whether it is in Japanese or in English. ...But, if I used Japanese, I would’ve been so careful about my expressions.” (Ms. Hirano)*

Whereas journal writing was presentational, comment writing was interpersonal. Comments were always written toward specific individuals, and that inevitably created social relationships among the teachers. In this relationship, they were aware about how their comments sounded to those who received them and about how language would impact such impressions. In particular, when using Japanese, they seemed to be keenly aware of how factors like their age in relationship to their classmates’ ages interacts with implicit social expectations (such as who typically presents or receives critique). In contrast, they perceived that writing comments in English was psychologically easier than writing in Japanese as they didn’t feel the same social pressures, even though writing in English was technically more challenging. The choice of language used to write comments demonstrates that reflective journal writing is both individual and social practice involving from the outset that requires negotiation of tacit group norms.

### **The Structure and Types of Written Comments**

The analysis of comments revealed patterns in the structures and types of participants’ written comments to their peers’ reflective journal entries. Overall, the written comments consisted of the patterns of a) set phrases, b) non-critical comments, c) critical comments, and the order was never structured another way. It is interesting that, while the guidelines instructed that the assigned task was to give critical comments that could bring different perspectives and/or interpretations, the participant teachers took several steps to do so. The data revealed that there were multiple factors that contributed to the construction of this pattern.

**Set phrases.** Participants’ comments almost always started with a set phrase such as “(Name), thank you for sharing your experience with us” or its Japanese translation. This common pattern was likely to be shaped by the participants imitating the instructors’ comments. In fact, Ms. Hirano and Ms. Tajima explained that they borrowed the set phrases from the comments I (the instructor) wrote on their journals. Indeed, in the first week of the course, I wrote my comments earlier than all the participants so that they could see examples of the course expectations, and each of my comments started with the set phrase “Thank you for sharing your experience with us.” Therefore, it is probable that, upon writing the first comments to their peers simply employed the phrase that their instructor used. However, through the interview it was also found that the teachers developed other meanings of their use of the set phrases.

Whereas the participants started to employ the set phrases through the conscious imitation or the subconscious influence of the instructor’s comments, it is interesting that some teachers eventually made different meanings out of using the phrases. In the interview, Ms. Tajima described the moment she opened her journal entry to see the comments from her peers for the first time,

*“When I was opening the file of my journal, I wondered what critical comments would be written there. But what I saw in the comments first was that phrase (‘Thank you for sharing your experience with us.’), and I felt like it was a relief. And, I kept using it as I thought it would be reassuring.” (Ms. Tajima)*

Receiving critical comments can be stressful, intimidating, or even scary because they may involve negative evaluations on not only one’s practices and techniques but also one’s deep-

rooted theories and philosophy. Ms. Tajima found the set phrases as a kind of cushion that reduced her worry and employed it for her peers hoping they would feel the same way.

Ms. Honda and Ms. Saito mentioned that they found it important to express their gratitude to their peers for sharing their stories as the topics they wrote about often contained some bitterness, failure, or pain.

*“What we described in our journal entries were mostly not positive experiences. Sharing a negative part of daily teaching may not be something we were happy to do. But I was really thankful that we could share our experiences and that I could feel like their experiences could be my experiences. So, I think it was a real ‘Thank you.’” (Ms. Honda)*

*“I was very thankful for being able to read my peers’ daily teaching experiences... So, I was like, ‘Thank you.’ It’s very special, and it was the only opportunity for me to read how other teachers experienced their classroom.” (Ms. Saito)*

These teachers’ descriptions suggest that they shared common understandings that it is not easy for in-service teachers to vulnerably face and share their pedagogical challenges with others and that sharing such experiences with others itself is a brave act that deserves gratitude. While the purpose of using the set phrases was different among Ms. Tajima, and Ms. Honda, and Ms. Saito, they each found meaning in using the phrase.

**Non-critical comments.** After the set phrases, non-critical comments followed in most of the peer comments. Non-critical comments are defined as those not offering alternate ways of thinking about the experience. These phrases were not found in the instructor’s model comments. Non-critical comments included 1) praise, 2) expressions of interest, and 3) empathy. Examples of each are presented in Table 2 below. The teachers explained in the interviews that these non-critical comments acted a cushioning material, just like the set phrases, that reduced the potential offensiveness of the critical comments they later provided.

*“It (giving non-critical comments) is probably because I have to give a critical comment later. As a cushion. Cushion... It’s politeness. I think that a sense of politeness is also included there.” (Ms. Hirano)*

*“Giving a critical comment means that I had to often write something negative to the person (who wrote the journal). But, writing some positive comments before doing so would be good just like putting a cushion. And, it should not be the other way around... It would be simply painful (to receive critical comments) if there were no positive comments.” (Ms. Tajima)*

*“I thought it was better and easy to start with an empathetic comment, even when I had to mention something negative. It was like politeness.” (Ms. Honda)*

The teachers considered it to be polite to put a cushion before providing a critical message, suggesting that even though *critical* does not equate with *negative*, the commenters still felt that critique might be interpreted negatively by the receiver. Ms. Tajima’s expression (*it should not be the other way around*) suggests that there was an intersubjective idea that non-critical, positive messages had to come before critical ones. This constructed norm of politeness in the class appeared to contribute to shaping the pattern of comment writing.

**Table 2. Examples of Non-critical Comments**

Type of non-critical comments	Example
Praise	<i>It is great that you are trying to apply the theories we learned in our graduate courses. It is great that you have already tried what you have learned through writing the journal in your teaching. I think you are trying so hard to teach better through trial and error.</i>
Interest	<i>Using Generative AI as a tool for learning is an exciting idea. It was interesting to learn about how you teach English in a school context that is very different from mine. It is interesting to read that the slow learners in your class began to spontaneously participate in the class.</i>
Empathy	<i>I understood your struggle because I often have similar experiences in my classroom. Your description of the student reminded me of one of my students I have been carefully observing. I can empathize because I, too, often wonder about what kind of questions should be involved in the exams.</i>

At the same time, non-critical comments were not just the result of the shared norm of politeness. The participant teachers also made individual meanings through giving non-critical comments that were different from politeness. For example, Ms. Saito expressed her positive attitude toward the challenges and struggles that her peers described in their journal writing.

*“Praising someone makes me feel happy. I like finding some good things about the person. When I read a description in which things did not go as well as the teacher had expected, I think it is a good chance, although I would be disappointed if I was the one who experienced it. I don’t know why, but when it is not about my experience, I feel like it’s okay. I think the teacher is probably feeling disappointed, but she can take something out of the experience. Maybe that’s a good thing.” (Ms. Saito)*

In this excerpt, her sense of ‘praising someone’ involves both her encouragement (*I think it’s a good chance, maybe that’s a good thing*) and empathy (*I think the teacher is probably feeling disappointed*) to her peers. However, it is interesting that she is aware of the contradiction in her feelings here. She is encouraging her peers to be positive about their pedagogical challenge simultaneously while she knows that she herself would not be able to be so positive about it. Or perhaps, as Ms. Saito is fully aware that it is not easy to avoid feeling disappointment when facing pedagogical challenges, she is expressing her empathetic encouragement to her peers. In this sense, praise is more than politeness to her peers; it also reflects Ms. Saito’s attempt to reframe how teachers see their pedagogical challenges.

On the other hand, giving non-critical comments can be an act of constructing a new group norm in collaborative reflective journal writing. Ms. Hirano offered her introspective thoughts regarding why she tended to leave empathetic comments.

*“I left an empathetic message because I could simply empathize with them. But, at the same time, it could be also because I would like to be empathized with. A teacher is alone in the classroom, you know what I mean? It is like, it’s tough to have no one who can empathize with me. A part of me is subconsciously hoping to be empathized with, so I may be paying it forward. Probably.” (Ms. Hirano)*

In her daily teaching, which could be described as a lonely battle at times, Ms. Hirano subconsciously wished to receive empathetic comments from her peers, as receiving them would have been meaningful affective support for her. Indeed, 41 of the 49 comments she gave to her peers included non-critical, positive comments such as praise and/or empathy. It is possible that her wish to receive empathetic comments encouraged her to first offer them to her peers. That means, paying empathetic comments forward was not just a result of the fixed group norm of politeness but also an attempt to construct a new group norm of give-and-take. Thus, giving non-critical comments was perhaps both the enactment of a group norm (being polite) and the negotiation of other meanings.

**Critical comments.** All participants shared that giving critical comments was the toughest part of the process. The interviews identified the challenges that they experienced in the process of being critical and verbalizing their critical thoughts in the comments. While giving critical comments, they engaged in negotiation and dialogue with the described experiences in the journal entry, the collaborative environment in the class, and also their own habits. Below I describe the challenges they faced as they negotiated writing critical comments in relationship to how they viewed they would be perceived and in relationship to breaking away from engrained habits of commenting on others' practices and experiences.

The participant teachers offered critical comments in each of their responses to their peers' journal entries as instructed in the guidelines. Critical comments are considered comments that brought different ways of seeing and/or inquiring the phenomena to the journal entries. Upon reviewing the teachers' comments on their peers' journal entries, I identified several sub-categories of critical comments: 1) personal (experiential) thoughts on the described experience, 2) interpretations of the experience, 3) questions regarding the experience, and 4) suggestions/advice (See Table 3). Personal thoughts on the described experience (a non-critical comment) and interpretations of it (a critical comment) differ in that the latter offers a new interpretation of the experience that is different from the one the writer of the journal entry shared. Questions regarding the experience covered a wide variety of inquiries such as the contextual information, reasons/theories behind a certain teaching practice or interpretation, assessment methods, and interpersonal relationship in the classroom. Suggestions/advice include both direct and indirect expressions encouraging the peer to try a certain method or approach.

Giving critical comments to their peers was not an easy or simple task for the teachers. The process of writing critical comments required the teachers to give extra, careful consideration to their writing. Among the three sub-categories of critical comments, the one that was most frequently offered was *questions regarding the described experience* (171 times). One possible reason why most comments included *questions regarding the described experience* is that the teachers came from different school contexts. In order to understand the experiences described in the journal entries and develop their own interpretations, they needed to rely on the contextual information regarding the experiences. However, as they were not familiar with the school contexts of the peers, contextual information to interpret the experiences might have been insufficient. Indeed, in our interviews all the participant teachers shared their struggles in figuring out the context of the experiences described in the reflective journal entries.

*"I think it was challenging, I mean, Ms. Hirano and Ms. Saito are teaching in very different school contexts from mine. So, school culture would be different, maybe what the school expects of the students is different, and what the students want and think would be also different. I was thinking about such things." (Ms. Honda)*

*"Since I used to be a junior high school teacher [before working in my current*

*job in a community program], I can imagine what junior high school is like. But, most of the others are high school teachers, so I thought my comments might be off the point.” (Ms. Saito)*

**Table 3. Sub-categories of Critical Comments**

Sub-categories (the number of appearances)	Examples
Personal (experiential) thoughts on the described experience (89)	<p><i>I think it takes time for learners to acquire the subject (third person singular) -verb agreement. I still miss the “s” sometimes when I speak English. But, since it is often intelligible without it, I cannot really fix it.</i></p> <p><i>I imagine that it is quite hard for the students to discuss such an issue in English, and even in Japanese.</i></p> <p><i>Reading your journal entries every week, I feel like the students that you described were not good at English are becoming more engaging in the task.</i></p>
Interpretations of the described experience (64)	<p><i>You said you are struggling with the different purposes your students have in learning English. But I think they have a common purpose that they would like to be able to communicate in English.</i></p> <p><i>The student may be so shy that he cannot show that he is making an effort in front of his friends, and that could be why he could focus on learning when they are not with him.</i></p> <p><i>Reading your descriptions, I got an impression that you are changing your teaching style to a more receptive one in order to manage the students who cause troubles in the class.</i></p>
Questions regarding the described experience (171)	<p><i>You mentioned that the student is “troublesome.” But, what do you mean by that? Is he essentially troublesome or has he been labeled as troublesome?</i></p> <p><i>What strategies can we employ to make these learners feel more comfortable and to offer scaffolding that helps them develop their speaking skills effectively?</i></p> <p><i>What is the reason for setting this question in the exam?</i></p>
Suggestions/advice (18)	<p><i>To support the student, it might be beneficial to provide more personalized and less stressful opportunities for him to practice vocabulary in context.</i></p> <p><i>I feel like, if you offer your students chances to reflect on their learning in the class, it would help them notice something meaningful.</i></p> <p><i>Why don’t you give your students some phrases in advance so that they can practice creating questions by themselves?</i></p>

In addition to insufficient contextual information, the interviews revealed that there was also tacit peer pressure that led the participant teachers to being more cautious about sharing their interpretations of the described experiences.

*“When you write a comment, you care about how the comment will be received, don’t you? I think that was the tough part. I couldn’t write comments as optimistically as writing my journal entry. It was difficult because I first had to imagine the situations that I did not actually experience and think about what the relationship between the teacher and students would be like and what challenges*

*there would be in the classroom.” (Ms. Hirano)*

*“I had to give comments without really knowing about the context and the students described there (in the journal), and in that sense, I felt like my comments would be judged. I really wanted to avoid asking a question that was missing the point... No one was actually judging my comments. But, because the person who wrote the journal could see them, and everybody could see them, I ended up having an idea that I had to write a good comment rather than sharing my honest thoughts.” (Ms. Tajima)*

Collaborative activities, by their very nature, involve the eyes of peers. It is interesting that Ms. Hirano felt this more in commenting on others' experiences than in writing about her own classroom (*I couldn't write comments as optimistically as writing my journal entry.*). Likewise, Ms. Tajima's excerpt above demonstrates the presence of the peer pressure she perceived regarding the quality of her comments. None of the participants mentioned judging others in the way they feared their comments might be judged, however. Part of the additional experienced pressure may have stemmed from the difference between writing about oneself (a topic in which they are the most expert) and writing to someone else they may feel has more professional experience, pedagogical competence, theoretical knowledge regarding language education, or some other qualification.

One possible explanation for why participants favored questions over other types of critical comments could be that questions served as an escape route for having to engage in more challenging critique. However, that explanation does not fully align with the participant's descriptions of using questions in their comments. In order to develop a critical question on a journal entry, they still had to view the experience differently from the peer who described the experience. Ms. Saito expressed her struggle in this process.

*“I had hard time putting a question mark in my comment. Bringing a different perspective like, ‘What do you think about this aspect?’ I don't have that kind of broad perspective. So, when someone explained about an experience, I tended to write about my reactive idea to it. And, the thought like ‘What do you think about this aspect?’ did not come up to my mind. So, I feel like I had to force myself to put question marks in my comments.” (Ms. Saito)*

Ms. Saito's self-analysis is reflected in the distribution of the sub-categories in her comments. Compared to the other three, she posed far fewer questions in her comments. In addition, her questions often asked how the writer of the journal think about the personal thoughts she provided just before the question. Although they may have asked more questions, the other participant teachers also struggled to view others' experiences critically. They all mentioned that they had to make a conscious effort to be critical in the commenting process.

Although the guidelines for commenting on journals stressed that the teachers should refrain from giving suggestions/advice due to the differences in the teaching contexts and individual pedagogical beliefs, it was observed 18 times of the total 179 comments. Six were written by Ms. Saito and nine were by Ms. Honda. However, it was not simply the result of ignoring or forgetting about the guidelines. In the process of writing critical comments, they were fighting against their habits of giving suggestions to others. In order to give critical comments, they had to be critical not only toward the descriptions written in the journal but also toward their own pedagogical assumptions and attitudes. Ms. Saito and Ms. Honda shared their struggles in suppressing their habitual behaviors.

*“A difficult thing was to develop an attitude of inquiry toward my peers. Maybe it's an old teacher thing, but I have had a habit of looking for and merely giving*

*methodical suggestions, even to myself, instead of carefully observing and analyzing what is really going on. I tend to be headed in that direction. ...Reading my peers' experiences in their classrooms, I always tended to think like, 'I would do this.' In reality, we are not in the same position or condition. So, I shouldn't do that because their understanding should be totally different from mine." (Ms. Saito)*

*"I tried not to give advice, but I probably have a habit of giving advice. ... This is very difficult, and I think it is a true habit of mine. I cannot help giving suggestions about the things I believe I am doing well on. I think I have done things based on my assumption that what I am doing is not wrong. ... And, it was hard for me to remind myself of that, and not to think like that. I worked on it, and it took time. I think that habit showed up in the first weeks. So, when it happened, I tried to tell myself, 'No, no, that's not good' and to keep myself away from those assumptions." (Ms. Honda)*

While Ms. Saito and Ms. Honda ended up writing suggestions/advice several times, by engaging with the guidelines thoughtfully and bringing their subconscious habits to attention, they worked toward developing a more open and critical stance toward others' (and possibly even their own) experiences.

This suggests that self-critical engagement in writing critical comments was another form of reflective practice for the participant teachers. Through working on comment writing under the guidelines, the teachers (at least Ms. Saito and Ms. Honda) were made to be aware that they possessed methodical and reductive assumptions about language teaching and that such assumptions naturally emerged as suggestions and advice in their comments. This awareness led them to reflect on their own assumptive behaviors in comment writing and to reconstruct them when needed. And, it was likely that the reflective process continued even retrospectively, considering that Ms. Saito repeatedly expressed her regrettable thoughts on this aspect in her interview.

*"Writing comments was tough for me. Not comment writing as a whole, but it was hard for me to bring a different perspective (than that of the write of journal entries). I tended to just enjoy reading them and I couldn't raise questions in the experiences I was reading. I think, if a question came up, it was possible to develop a new perspective. But I tended to empathize them and to say like, 'If I were in your position, I would do this.' I had a hard time distancing myself (from the described experiences)." (Ms. Saito)*

Thus, comment writing was not just one of the structures of collaborative reflective journal writing that promoted the reflective process of the writers of journal entries. Comment writing in collaborative reflective journal writing itself could become an experience that prompts reflection.

## **Discussion and Implications**

The findings above describe multiple interacting factors that affect how Japanese in-service EFL teachers engage in comment writing in collaborative reflective journal writing. In analyzing the pattern of comments the participating teachers engaged in, this study revealed that collaborative reflective practice involves sociocultural negotiations between the context and those who engage in reflective practice. The teachers negotiated sociocultural aspects of the context such as politeness and a sense of responsibility to their peers. Politeness included considerations such as which language to employ when commenting. Using Japanese to match the language of the journal author required navigating more complex social dynamics such as

age-based relationship expectations. The frequency of expressions of gratitude, praise, interest, and empathy in the participants' comments also reflects their sense of responsibility toward their peers. While some phrases taken up by the participants were rote in nature, the participants discussed the function those phrases played in softening critique. Though much of their commenting served these politeness and softening functions, the participant teachers did not avoid critique altogether. Another aspect of responsibility included engaging in an effort/commitment to bring a different perspective to peers even though this was described as quite challenging for many of the participants.

These findings suggest that teacher education programs employing collaborative reflective practice should consider and scaffold the more challenging sociocultural aspects of collaboration. This adds to the findings of previous studies arguing the necessity of structural support in collaborative reflective practice (Abednia et al, 2013; Johnson & Golombek, 2010; Luk, 2008). More specifically, for example, the next time I teach this reflective journal writing course I plan to set aside time in class in which the participating teachers and I (the instructor) can discuss how sociocultural aspects are influencing their comment writing process and problem solve common and/or individual issues. I anticipate this may include discussions on using English to comment even when the original post was in Japanese and/or clarifying instructions about what quality of peer comments are expected (e.g., avoiding suggestions/advice). Ideally these discussions would help to develop shared understandings about norms for facilitating a mutually helpful comment writing process.

Not all teacher educators work with teachers from a similar cultural background. Since reflective practice is widely implemented in SLTE and PD worldwide, it often involves culturally diverse teacher groups. Teacher educators employing collaborative reflective practice in these more diverse contexts may encounter more variety of context-specific sociocultural factors and need to navigate how those factors impact the teachers they work with as they engage in reflective practice.

Another point that this study highlights is that the act of comment writing itself can prompt another form of reflective practice. As the instructor leading the course, I admit that I had an assumption that peer comments were supplementary supports that would promote the teachers' reflective process regarding the experiences they respectively described in their journal entries. However, the findings of this study point out that the participant teachers also experienced another kind of reflective process related to their pedagogical understanding, theories, and attitudes through interpreting their peers' experiences and developing critical comments. In this sense, in the act of comment writing, the participant teachers were not just assisting their peers' reflective processes but also active introspective inquirers. In other words, comment writing can offer the teachers additional opportunities to become aware of their own pedagogical theories, principles and philosophy that have been present yet unnoticed and to reflectively negotiate and reconstruct them. This suggests that collaborative reflective practice activities need to be carefully designed with purposes in detail and scaffolded appropriately. It also requires us, teacher educators, to continue developing both theoretical and practical understanding about collaborative reflective process of teachers. Dialogic quality is essential to engaging in meaningful collaborative reflective practice (e.g., Dewey, 1916/1944; Farrell, 2020; Johnson & Golombek, 2010; Mann & Walsh, 2017; Rodgers, 2020), and part of deepening dialogic quality requires further understanding of how participants experience and engage in collaboration and their meaning making from that engagement.

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