

Reconceptualizing Noticing: Exploring Metacognitive Awareness through Written Reflection in EFL Learning

Sutriyani¹, Nanik Retnowati², Muhammad Furqan³

English Language Study Program
FKIP, Universitas Ibn Khaldun Bogor, Indonesia
sutriyaniadja8@gmail.com,

Abstract

Noticing is commonly understood as learners' awareness of language forms during the learning process. However, in natural classroom settings, noticing may extend beyond linguistic forms to include learners' awareness of their own learning processes. Reflection, in this context, can function as a metacognitive strategy that supports such awareness. This study aims to explore how learner noticing emerges in written reflections and how it reflects both language awareness and metacognitive engagement. This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach, using data from five written reflections produced by pre-service teachers in an English Language Education program after completing classroom learning activities. The analysis was guided by theory-based noticing categories and reflection frameworks to examine how learners express their awareness linguistically. The findings reveal that learners' noticing is predominantly directed toward their learning processes rather than specific language forms. Students frequently reported difficulties, challenges in understanding input, changes in their comprehension, and personal factors influencing their readiness to learn. These patterns indicate that written reflection encourages learners to engage in metacognitive noticing by making their learning processes more visible and structured. This study suggests that reflective writing in English not only enhances learners' awareness of how they learn but also supports their ability to articulate learning experiences in a coherent and meaningful way. Thus, reflection serves as a valuable pedagogical tool to activate metacognitive strategies while maintaining relevance to the concept of noticing in language learning.

Keywords: *EFL learning, metacognitive awareness, noticing, pre-service teachers, reflective writing*

INTRODUCTION

In English language learning, students constantly receive various forms of input, such as lectures, class discussions, reading materials, and other learning activities. The classroom environment provides a wealth of language exposure, but not all of that input automatically translates into meaningful learning (Brown, 2025). Only some learning experiences are truly viewed by learners as important to understand and remember (Andresen et al., 2020). This phenomenon suggests that success in language learning is determined not only by the amount of input received, but also by how learners pay attention to and are aware of that input during the learning process. It is in this context that attention and awareness become key factors in second language acquisition.

The Noticing Hypothesis, proposed by Richard Schmidt, asserts that input can only become intake when it is consciously perceived by the learner. In other words, language learning does not occur simply through exposure, but through a mental process that takes place when learners actively pay attention to something while learning (Tennant, 2020). This idea shifts the understanding of language learning from a passive process to one that relies heavily on the learner's cognitive engagement. What learners pay attention to becomes more important than the amount of input they receive.

As the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has evolved, "noticing" is no longer understood merely as paying attention to linguistic features such as grammar or vocabulary. Noticing is increasingly understood as a broader form of awareness that encompasses awareness of the learning process itself (Mason, 2021). At this point, the concept of metacognitive awareness becomes particularly relevant. Metacognitive awareness enables learners to recognize what they understand, what they find difficult, why they are struggling, and how they manage their learning strategies (Pintrich, 2002). Thus, noticing and metacognitive awareness are closely linked in explaining how language learning actually takes place from the learner's perspective.

In daily English language classroom instruction, students are often asked to write a reflection after a learning activity. These reflections typically cover their learning experiences, the challenges they faced, changes in their understanding, and personal circumstances that affect their readiness to learn. Through reflection, students not only review what they have learned, but also express how they interpret that learning experience (Coulson & Harvey, 2013). This reflective essay actually contains a wealth of insights into the learners' awareness, as it includes explicit expressions of what they realized during the learning process (Jordi, 2010). However, written reflections are still

rarely used as a primary source of data for identifying noticing in natural classroom settings.

Several recent studies suggest that written reflections can serve as a window into learners' metacognitive awareness in English language learning. Reflection helps learners organize their learning experiences, identify difficulties, and recognize the changes in their understanding (Chang, 2019). Nevertheless, studies that specifically examine the relationship between noticing, metacognitive awareness, and written reflection in the context of natural classroom learning remain very limited. Most research on noticing is still conducted in controlled settings through specific task designs or experimental treatments.

It is this limitation that creates an important opening for this study. Rather than directing learners' attention through specific interventions, this study seeks to examine what learners naturally notice through the written reflections they produce as part of their routine learning activities. Thus, this study aims to explore how noticing emerges naturally in students' written reflections and how it reflects metacognitive awareness in English language learning.

To explore how noticing emerges in written reflections, it is important to first consider the theoretical foundations of noticing in second language learning. The concept of noticing is rooted in the Noticing Hypothesis proposed by Richard Schmidt (1990), which states that conscious attention is a prerequisite for language learning. What learners learn from input is largely determined by what they consciously pay attention to (Schmidt, 1990). This idea emphasizes that learners are actually exposed to a vast amount of input during the learning process, but only a small portion of it is actually noticed by them and subsequently processed into meaningful learning. Thus, noticing helps explain why the same language exposure can yield different learning outcomes for each learner. Conscious attention serves as the determining factor in whether the input simply passes by as information or is truly processed into new knowledge.

Merrill Swain expanded on the concept of noticing through the idea of "noticing the gap," which refers to learners' awareness of the gap between their existing language abilities and the target language they are learning. This awareness often emerges when learners recognize that their current linguistic resources are insufficient to express their intended meaning (Swain, 1995). This perspective suggests that noticing is not only

related to what is observed in the input but also involves reflective awareness of one's own limitations. When learners realize they are unable to express something accurately, that moment becomes a pivotal point that triggers attention, a search for meaning, and efforts to improve. In other words, noticing also arises from the difficulties learners experience during the learning process.

Bill VanPatten, through his Input Processing theory, explains how learners process the input they receive and why some parts of the input are more easily noticed than others. When processing input, learners generally focus on meaning before they attend to linguistic form (VanPatten, 1996). Learners tend to prioritize meaning over form, so that only certain parts of the input actually receive conscious attention. Noticing plays a mediating role in converting input into internalized knowledge (Ellis, 2003). Peter Skehan complements this perspective by emphasizing the characteristics of the task as well as the learner's personal conditions. The nature of learning tasks influences how learners distribute their attention during learning (Skehan, 1998). This overall view suggests that noticing is influenced by the interaction between input, tasks, and the learner's internal state.

Developments in this field of study indicate that noticing is no longer understood merely as attention to linguistic forms such as grammar or vocabulary. Noticing is increasingly understood as a broader form of awareness, including awareness of the learning process itself. It is at this point that the concept of metacognitive awareness becomes highly relevant. Metacognition refers to one's awareness and management of personal cognitive processes during learning (Flavell, 1979). Thus, noticing and metacognitive awareness are interrelated in explaining how language learning actually occurs from the learner's perspective. This metacognitive awareness often manifests explicitly in the form of written reflection. Reflective writing encourages learners to examine and verbalize their learning experiences (Moon, 2006). Through reflection, learning experiences that were previously internal become linguistically visible through writing.

A number of studies in the context of English language learning indicate that written reflection can reveal learners' awareness of their own learning through their choice of language. Learners' reflective journals often contain linguistic signals that indicate metacognitive awareness (Farrell, 2018). Other studies have also shown that reflective writing makes learners' metacognitive processes observable within authentic classroom contexts (Ramadhanti et al., 2020). Research in Indonesian EFL contexts has

confirmed that learning journals and exit tickets can prompt reflective self-regulation and metacognitive engagement across lessons (Suharto et al., 2024). Experimental research has also found that the use of reflective journals significantly enhances participants' metacognitive awareness and writing skills following a period of repeated reflection during ESL writing classes (Aliyu et al., 2023). Furthermore, mixed-methods research reveals that metacognitive experiences in writing tasks contribute to learners' writing proficiency and awareness of strategy use in real classroom settings (Li et al., 2023). These findings confirm that through reflection, cognitive processes that were previously internal can become explicitly visible through the language learners use.

Recent research also shows that reflection helps learners identify learning difficulties, evaluate their understanding, and recognize changes in their understanding during the learning process. Reflection provides visible traces of learners' cognitive and metacognitive engagement in learning (Xu & Zhu, 2024). Studies exploring metacognitive strategy instruction in EFL writing suggest that learners who engage in metacognitive reflection demonstrate greater planning, monitoring, and evaluation during writing tasks (Han, 2024). Emerging research also shows that metacognitive reflection, including in AI-assisted writing environments, amplifies learners' engagement and autonomous regulation of their writing development (Yang & Park, 2025). Thus, written reflection is not merely a record of learning experiences but can be viewed as linguistic evidence of noticing and metacognitive awareness that naturally emerge in English language learning, as through these writings learners express what they notice, what they are aware of, and how they interpret the learning process they are undergoing.

Research Question

What aspects of second language learning do learners naturally notice in their written reflections?

METHOD

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative design to explore how noticing is reflected as metacognitive awareness in students' written reflections within an EFL classroom context. The study focused on how learners linguistically express their awareness of learning experiences through reflective writing.

The data comprised five written reflections produced by university students following classroom learning activities. Participants were selected purposively on the basis that reflective writing was a regular part of their instructional practice. The reflections were naturally occurring classroom texts and were not produced specifically for research purposes.

Each reflection was written immediately after the lesson and consisted of one to two paragraphs describing what students understood, the difficulties they encountered, and aspects of the lesson they considered important. These texts functioned as authentic evidence of learners' noticing during the learning process.

Data analysis was conducted through iterative reading of the reflections to identify sentences indicating awareness. These sentences were then categorized according to a theory-informed framework of noticing.

Table 1. Theoretical Framework of Noticing Categories

Category of Noticing	Theoretical Source
Noticing learning difficulties (gap)	Swain (1985); Schmidt (1990)
Noticing of input challenge	VanPatten (1996)
Noticing of conceptual change	Ellis (2005)
Noticing of task/personal condition	Skehan (1998)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through systematic coding, four dominant categories of noticing were identified. These categories are represented by excerpts that most clearly demonstrate learners' conscious awareness during learning.

Table 2. Representative Evidence of Learner Noticing

Category of Noticing	Student	Original Excerpt
Noticing learning difficulties (gap)	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5	S1: "Actually I'm weak in spoken and listening English." S2: "I realized that my English skills still lacking." S3: "I find it hard to express them in English because I'm afraid of mispronouncing words and my vocabulary is limited."

		S4: "I feel a little bit confused in the first material." S5: "I didn't fully understand the rules and the material explained at the beginning."
Noticing of input challenge	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5	S1: "The thing that challenge for me is for the assessment not simple and has some complex elements." S2: "The vocabulary are very unfamiliar." S3: "There were too many things to understand." S4: "I felt quite surprised because speaking assessment is far more complex than I imagined." S5: "I was still struggling in choosing action verbs for each cognitive level."
Noticing of conceptual change	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5	S1: "The lecturer made me not afraid about my spoken in English." S2: "I realized that assessing reading and listening is not only about giving questions." S3: "I realized these skills are not simple like I thought." S4: "I realized that assessment is not only about giving scores." S5: "I realized that teachers should understand students' abilities before assessing them."
Noticing of task/personal condition	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5	S1: "The room was too cold and my focus was disturbed." S2: "I came late and missed some important points." S3: "I did not read the material before the class started." S4: "I was absent during the speaking assessment class."

S5: "I need to manage my time better so I won't be late."

This demonstrate that students' written reflections revealed several forms of noticing related to English language learning. Through reflective writing, learners expressed awareness of their language difficulties, challenges in processing learning input, conceptual understanding, and personal conditions affecting learning.

The category of noticing learning difficulties (gap) appeared most frequently in the reflections. Students recognized weaknesses in speaking, listening, pronunciation, vocabulary, and comprehension. Statements such as "weak in spoken and listening English" and "vocabulary is limited" indicate awareness of the gap between learners' current proficiency and expected language performance. This finding supports the concept of noticing the gap proposed by Merrill Swain and Richard Schmidt, which emphasizes learners' conscious recognition of linguistic limitations during language learning.

The reflections also showed noticing of input challenge. Learners described some classroom materials and concepts as complex, unfamiliar, or difficult to understand. Expressions such as "far more complex" and "struggling in choosing action verbs" suggest that learners monitored the cognitive demands of instructional input. This finding aligns with the input processing perspective associated with Bill VanPatten, where noticing occurs when learners struggle to process challenging input.

Another category identified was noticing of conceptual change. Students reflected changes in their understanding of English learning and assessment. Some learners reported becoming less afraid of speaking English, while others realized that assessment involves more than simply giving scores or giving questions. These reflections indicate that classroom experiences contributed to changes in learners' understanding of language learning. This supports the perspective of conceptual restructuring discussed by Rod Ellis.

Finally, the reflections demonstrated noticing of task and personal condition. Learners recognized how factors such as classroom environment, lateness, absence, and preparation influenced their learning process. Statements about missing important points, coming late, or losing focus because of classroom conditions indicate awareness

of contextual factors affecting engagement in English learning tasks. This finding is consistent with task-related perspectives proposed by Peter Skehan.

Overall, the findings suggest that written reflection functions as evidence of metacognitive awareness in English language learning. Through reflection, learners identified language difficulties, recognized challenges in understanding input, reflected on conceptual development, and evaluated personal conditions affecting their learning experiences.

CONCLUSION

This study reconceptualizes noticing by demonstrating that, in authentic classroom contexts, learners' awareness extends beyond linguistic forms to include conscious attention to their own learning processes. Analysis of students' written reflections revealed that noticing most frequently emerged as metacognitive awareness, where learners recognized their difficulties, monitored challenges in processing input, experienced conceptual changes, and evaluated personal or contextual factors influencing their learning. These findings indicate that what learners naturally notice in classroom learning is not limited to grammar or vocabulary, but is strongly related to how they understand, manage, and reflect on their learning experiences.

Written reflection, therefore, serves as a meaningful pedagogical space where learners articulate their awareness in a structured and observable way. Through reflective writing, internal cognitive and metacognitive processes become linguistically visible, allowing noticing to be identified through learners' own expressions. This study highlights that reflective practice in EFL classrooms can function not only as a learning activity but also as evidence of metacognitive engagement that supports deeper learning. Ultimately, the findings broaden the understanding of noticing in second language learning by positioning reflection as a natural medium through which learners demonstrate conscious awareness of both language learning and the process of learning itself.

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