

## **Introducing Reflective Teaching Practices for Center for Language Studies Instructors: A Preliminary Study**

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### **Abstract**

Instructors strive for continual professional development (PD) throughout their careers but may only have the ability to engage in focused PD irregularly due to factors such as time, funding, or their teaching environment. Reflective teaching practices are tools which can be deployed according to an instructor's schedule, have little to no barriers to entry, and are adaptable to various situations. This exploratory pilot study sought to identify Center for Language Studies (CLS) instructors' impressions about the ease of use and understanding of two practices: self-observation and peer observation. Feedback gathered through a questionnaire containing open and closed Likert-scaled items indicated that instructors found both practices easy to use and understand. Further comments elucidated participants' affective reactions to engaging in the practices. These reactions were mixed and provided valuable insight regarding foci of future iterations of the study. Taken together, these results indicated that there may be value in further introduction of reflective practices to instructors at the CLS, but due to the low sample size (N=4) in this study, any results should be interpreted with caution.

*Keywords:* reflective practice, professional development

### **Introduction**

Professional development is one constant in a successful educator's career. It can be accomplished in a number of ways, such as by attending seminars and conferences, reading current literature in the field, or simply conversing with colleagues after

teaching a class. However, there are many constraints on an instructor's time, making travel to conferences or time for reading and discussion with others a luxury, when they are in all reality necessity. Reflective teaching practices are different techniques by which instructors collect data about their teaching practices in a systematic way with the ultimate goal of making conscious change to their classroom practice (Farrell, 2015). Thanks to their variety and relative ease of use (Farrell, 2018), these practices provide instructors the ability to participate in professional development whenever they may find time. Teacher training programs often include self-observation and peer observation components as means of introducing the reflective practices to pre-service and in-service teachers. However, it is often the case that these practices happen once or twice and are not part of an ongoing thread in the teacher training program itself (Farrell, 2018). Simply asking instructors to engage in reflection is not enough; these practices need to be introduced, their proper use instructed on, and then incorporated into teachers' practices as a constant evaluative process.

To that end, this pilot study sought to introduce two reflective teaching practices to instructors at Nagasaki University and evaluate their efficacy through the use of a questionnaire measuring ease of use, ease of understanding, and affective factors generated by the two practices – self-observation through the use of audio/video (henceforth self-observation) and peer observation with feedback (henceforth peer observation).

### **Background of the Study**

The term “reflective practices” serves as an umbrella under which a number of practices that instructors employ are contained. These practices have been present in the education field since the 1930s and take on one form or another as they are applied to different disciplines by practitioners in those fields (Schön, 1983). One key differentiation in terminology that requires initial understanding is the difference between contemplation and reflection. It is often the case that the term *reflective practices* brings to mind the habit of thinking back on a class that was just taught and what events happened within it (e.g., student attitudes, actions, reactions, teacher actions, or any other number of events that occur in a classroom) as a means of reflection. Farrell (2015) argues that a set of actions such as these should be viewed as contemplation, as they neglect a key aspect of reflection, which is to use information gleaned from this contemplation as a means to solve an existing question related to practice.

It is important to note that the act of reflection itself is further differentiated by the level of an instructor's practice within which it occurs. Three levels of reflection are often agreed upon by researchers (Jay & Johnson, 2002): (a) The descriptive, focusing on teaching practices; (b) the conceptual, focusing on the rationale behind teaching practices; and (c) the critical, focusing on socio-political reasons and effects of teaching practices. Within these three levels, the depth and breadth of the manner and intensity on which one can reflect on their teaching practice intensify and show that reflection is not simply contemplation but is in fact a deep practice which instructors can approach from a number of different perspectives. Whether an instructor chooses to reflect upon one or all three levels is a personal choice and is best addressed by considering the needs and abilities of an individual's situation.

To summarize this background of reflective practice and its application to the study at hand: this study focuses primarily on the descriptive level of reflection by introducing two reflective practices intended to allow instructors to look back on a class and examine specific teaching practices employed therein. It is certainly the case that instructors may move to conceptual and critical levels of reflection in addition to the descriptive level. However, these levels were not explicitly addressed in this study. The initial goal of using reflective practice in this study is for participants to not only further understand a specific aspect of teaching practice, but also move towards how that practice can be improved upon in the future. The next section will introduce classroom observation methods and detail prior research on their use in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).

### **Classroom observation methods**

A classroom is a busy place. It is often said that much of what is going on in a classroom remains unknown to a teacher who is simultaneously focusing on any number of tasks, such as ensuring the continuity of a lesson, engagement and motivation of students, and engaging in classroom management (Richards & Lockhart, 2004). Through the use of some kind of recording device (e.g., audio, visual, peers), a record is made of what is happening in a classroom. This record can then be examined to identify specific teaching practices and their occurrence in a lesson, allowing the instructor to review classroom situations with the intent of refining or adjusting a practice for future improvement. Two methods of classroom observation used for reflective practice are self-observation and peer observation.

### **Self-observation**

Self-observation is concerned with a systematic approach to, "the observation,

evaluation, and management of one's own behavior" (Richards, 1990, p. 118). Following the recording of a full or partial class using some form of audio or video recording, a reflective practitioner begins post-class analysis. The initial step of this analysis is to decide which specific teaching practice(s) will be identified for analysis. This could be as simple as selecting a single factor (e.g., classroom interaction) or as involved as including a range of factors (e.g., student talking time vs. teacher talking time, classroom communication, lesson structure). Following this, the recording of the class is analyzed for instances of the teaching practices. Depending on the means of analysis, these can be tallied for number of occurrences, transcribed for analysis of language used, or measured in whatever way best suits the analysis desired by the practitioner. Farrell (2015) comments that through the transcription of an entire class, instructors benefit from the chance to observe patterns in their teaching. Although it is commonly seen that the method in which a practitioner decides to conduct their self-observation is most often based on constraints of time and energy, rendering this form of transcription available only to those who devote extended amounts of time towards it.

Audio and video-assisted self-reflection is a common component in pre-service TESOL teaching training programs. Studies on the use of self-observation in this context have found that with proper training on self-observation's ability to influence future teaching practice, pre-service teachers engaging in self-observation were able to identify how their current teaching practices could be adapted to create more successful classes in their futures (Moser, Harris, & Carle, 2012; Zhu, 2014). However, without proper guidance on the use of self-observation, pre-service teachers are likely to simply descriptively analyze what they observe in recordings of their teachings, without using this information to work towards a plan for improvement, as would be expected in the use of a reflective practice (Yesilbursa, 2011).

In-service TESOL instructors, while occasionally wary of the practice of self-reflection at first (Kang & Cheng, 2013), seemed to have successful experiences on the whole. Studies found an increase in self-awareness through the use of audio and video self-reflection, which lead to positive results for both teachers and students thanks to changes in teachers' classroom practices, which resulted in more student learning (Kang & Cheng, 2013; Mercado & Baecher, 2014). As it is rare to see a requirement for self-observation as a method of assessment of in-service teachers, it may be worthwhile to bear in mind that participants in these studies may be more interested in the concept of reflective practices for their own professional development

and therefore more likely to report positive results. Notwithstanding this claim, the use of self-observation by teachers has been seen to be a beneficial method of reflection for instructors of different levels of experience.

### **Peer observation**

Peer observation continues the systematic approach to observation that defines a reflective, rather than contemplative practice. These observations may be used for similar purposes as self-observations and benefit from the involvement of another teacher's presence who can monitor a class in real time. In this sense, while a self-observation is a solitary endeavor, a peer observation provides a partner with which one can check and confirm teaching practices that may be out of step with what is expected by either the teacher or observer. Following a noticing of this imbalance, peers work together to address it and reflect on how it can be addressed going forward to result in improved classroom practice. Similar to self-observations, the teaching practice(s) to be observed can be singular or plural and are agreed upon before peer observation. A caveat here being the finite nature of human attention, resulting in the number of practices to focus on being limited. After agreeing on the practices to be observed, the teacher defines their view of a practice (e.g., when I say "action zone" I mean how often I direct my attention towards someone) so that there is no ambiguity in what is required of the observer. Observation and recording in the classroom can consist of anything from simple note-taking by the observer to a detailed, minute-by-minute analysis of events; the method of recording is often dictated by the teaching practices on which the teacher wishes to receive feedback. Farrell (2015) offers a variety of potential teacher partnerships beyond that of a teacher-observer relationship, such as team teaching, lesson study, and critical friendships. As this study focused on simple feedback delivery, these partnerships will not be detailed further.

Following the observation and recording of a class, a feedback session should be scheduled soon after. During this feedback session, observer and teacher work together to examine the events of the class and how they relate to the teaching practices identified in a pre-observation meeting. Here, an important note needs to be made: Peer observations are frequently seen as evaluative measures for both pre-service and in-service teachers. A distinction should be made between these evaluative and other non-evaluative peer observations. The focus of this study is on ones of the non-evaluative nature. This means that during the feedback session, comments provided to the teacher by the observer should focus only on what was observed (e.g. you said "okay" 52 times this class) and should not maintain any judgements (e.g. you

say “okay” too much) on what was observed. Judgements on teaching practices are the sole responsibility of the teacher who was being observed, who may or may not choose to assign these judgements. The goal of the feedback session itself is for teachers to receive feedback on teaching practices that they have identified as potential areas for improvement. Therefore, once the feedback session has been completed, the final step of a peer observation is for the teacher to review their feedback, test their hypotheses, and formulate plans for change in the classroom that will lead to future improvements.

Research on the use of peer observation in pre-service teachers tends to mainly focus on mentor-student relationships, as can be expected. While these partnerships do fall under the realm of peer observation, they do have a decidedly more evaluative tint to them than those established between strictly defined peers. This power relationship between mentor and protege brings positive effects – it is the case more often than not that by being given feedback on a lesson from a peer seen as more experienced than themselves, pre-service teachers engage in a range of reflection on the feedback they received, regardless of if they accept or deny the feedback in the end (Waring, 2013). True peer mentoring among pre-service teachers has seen both positive and negative effects. In general, relationships amongst teachers are strengthened due to the need to let down one’s defenses in order to receive constructive feedback (Nguyen & Baldauf, 2010). However, even with strengthened relationships, there are instances when the feedback given is seen as ineffective due to its softening, which can be attributed to instances of lack of ownership of comments or desire to maintain cultural boundaries in a cross-cultural environment (Wachob, 2011).

These affective aspects that are encountered in a peer observation become more defined when applied to in-service teachers. Lasagabaster and Sierra (2011) found that while their participants did believe that giving clear and truthful feedback was necessary, they also encountered difficulties in delivering feedback due to not wanting to appear negative or critical of their partner, essentially negating the entire practice. These sentiments were echoed in a variety of cultures showing that one of the main challenges to employing peer observations as a form of reflective practice is in how to encourage and support open and honest sharing of feedback. Farrell (2018) cites Ryder (2012), in France, Shousha (2015), in Saudi Arabia, and Vo and Mai Ngyuen (2010) in Vietnam all found issues with participants doubting the authenticity of the feedback they received, as well as admitting to softening the feedback they provided to peers. Meanwhile, he continues to cite Lakshmi (2014), in India, Gun (2010) in

Turkey, and Mak and Pun (2015) in Hong Kong who found positive results when peers engaged either with each other or with senior colleagues in observation practices. Thanks to these previous studies, it is clear to see that emphasis must be made on the methods and benefits of non-evaluative feedback when training is given in in-service peer observation practice. Without addressing this key feature, a researcher runs the risk of invalidating all data they collect likely due to participants' desires to maintain appropriate social distance when delivering feedback.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

As an exploratory pilot study, the goal of this study was to gauge the efficacy of certain types of reflective practices as potential supplements to annual professional development (PD) sessions. Self-observation and peer observation practices were chosen for their perceived familiarity to participants, their low time requirements, and their focus on the descriptive level of classroom practice. Since PD sessions include part-time instructors who have commitments to multiple institutions, the immediacy and convenience of employment of the practices were seen as most applicable to a future target population.

The study is a mixed-methods study, employing a questionnaire that measures attitudes towards reflective practices quantitatively through the use of Likert-scaled closed items and qualitatively through the use of short response open items. The results of these measurements were used to answer the following three research questions:

RQ 1. To what extent are the reflective practices introduced to instructors seen as easy to use?

RQ 2. To what extent are the practices introduced to instructors seen as easy to understand?

RQ 3. What are instructors' attitudes toward the reflective practices introduced in the study?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants (N=4) were full-time instructors employed at Nagasaki University, Japan. Three were male and one was female. Their teaching experience ranged from a minimum of 6.5 years to a maximum of 29 years. Two participants worked as either professor or assistant professor for the Center for Language Studies (CLS) at Nagasaki University. The other two participants were employed by the University of Montana

and worked in the Special Course in Academic Skills (SCAS) Program at Nagasaki University. Participants stated that they engaged in professional development (e.g., attendance at academic conferences, workshops, and/or training sessions) in varying amounts. The participants from the SCAS program (n=2) indicated a rate of once a semester, while CLS instructors (n=2) indicated a rate of once an academic year.

### **Instrumentation of the Questionnaires**

Two questionnaires were developed to be used in the feedback session, with items unique to self-observation (Appendix A) and to peer observation (Appendix B). An item bank was developed for items measuring ease of use, clarity, and affective factors. Following a round of revision, English-language items were selected for inclusion in each questionnaire. The questionnaire was input into and administered through Google Forms.

Each questionnaire began with two open, general items which allowed participants to indicate the teaching practice they chose to identify and their reasoning behind this choice. The questionnaires then presented closed, scaled items intended to measure the two constructs addressed in RQs 1 and 2 (i.e., ease of use and understanding). Following guidelines set by Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010), a minimum of three Likert scale items were used for each construct being measured. Items measuring the constructs were mixed together, with some items negatively worded to avoid the possibility of participants neglecting to fully consider an item before providing an answer (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010). Scaled items sought four levels of agreement with a statement: 1=*strongly disagree*, 2=*disagree*, 3=*agree*, and 4=*strongly agree*. Open questions were attached to closed questions in this section for participants to provide follow-up reasoning or reflections on their answers. The third section of the questionnaires included a mixture of open and closed items focused on participants' familiarity with reflective practices. Demographic questions were provided at the end of the questionnaire. A detailed breakdown of the items included in the questionnaires is seen in Table 1.



Table 1

*Questionnaire Item Breakdown by Topic Type*

Topic	Self-observation (n=24)	Peer observation (n=25)
General	2	2
Ease of use	4	6*
Ease of understanding	5	4*
Familiarity with reflective practices	7	7
Process of self-observation	2	0
Affect	0	3
Demographics	4	3

*Note.* The asterisk(\*) indicates an open follow-up item included with each closed scale item, counted as one paired item.

**Procedures**

**Training.** Prior to enacting the reflective practices, participants received an approximately one-hour training session. In the first half of the training, the researchers introduced participants to Farrell (2015)'s framework for reflective practices in an informal discussion format. The second half of the training was used to train participants on how to enact either self-observation or peer observation. First, participants were asked to select one or more of their teaching practices on which they wished to receive feedback. Examples were provided for participants (Appendix C), but they were free to choose practices not included on this list. Following this, they wrote their selected practice on the "Steps for a Successful Reflection" handout (Appendix D) which was created by the researcher for this study. Finally, the researcher walked through the steps listed with participants and provided them chances to ask for clarification.

**Peer observations.** Those using peer observations first met with each other to discuss the teaching practice that would be the target of the observation. At this time, a post-class feedback session appointment was made between the observer and the teacher. During the class being observed, the observing participant noted instances of the specific teaching practice for future feedback delivery. During the feedback session, peers provided non-evaluative feedback on the class and worked together to form an action plan for further changes to their teaching practice and classroom. Participants then completed the questionnaire following this feedback session.

**Self-observations.** Participants engaging in self-observation were provided a digital audio recording device to use to record their classroom. At the beginning of their

target class, they informed students about the presence of the recorder. Following the target class, participants reviewed the audio to identify and evaluate instances of their teaching practice. Following this review, participants formed an action plan for further changes to the target practice. Finally, the questionnaire was completed by participants, providing their feedback on the self-observation process.

### Data Analysis

Questionnaire results were exported from Google Forms in CSV formatted Microsoft Excel files. First, scaled items were rearranged and ordered by construct. Then, responses to closed scaled items were converted from phrase to numerical format with “strongly disagree” receiving a score of 1, increasing in 1-point increments to a score of 4 for a response of “strongly agree.” Following this, negatively-worded items were reverse coded (i.e., an answer of “strongly disagree” would not receive a score of 1, but a score of 4). Finally, mean scores were calculated for each construct being measured via a scaled item to provide general inferential relationship information. Results of these calculations are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

*Mean Scores of Agreement in Scaled Variables (Maximum Value = 4)*

Aspect of reflective practice	<i>M(SD)</i>	
	Self-observation	Peer observation
Ease of use	3.13 (1.44)	3.58 (0.20)
Ease of understanding	3.4 (0.65)	3.38 (0.75)

## Results

### **RQ 1. To what extent are the reflective practices introduced to instructors seen as easy to use?**

Responses to items measuring ease of use showed that regardless of the reflective practice they engaged in, participants agreed with the statement that the practices were easy to use ( $M=3.13$ ,  $SD=0.65$  in self-observations,  $M=3.58$ ,  $SD=0.20$  in peer observations). The participants engaged in peer observation reported a higher level of ease than those who practiced self-observations. The only difficulty regarding the practice that was provided by participants was the difficulty in scheduling a post-observation feedback conference. The main feedback provided by participants who undertook self-observation was that they would have preferred to video record their lesson, as opposed to audio recording.

## **RQ 2. To what extent are the practices introduced to instructors seen as easy to understand?**

All participants agreed with the statement that the practices themselves were easy to understand ( $M=3.4$ ,  $SD=0.65$  in self-observations,  $M=3.38$ ,  $SD=0.75$  in peer observations). There was a small difference in the mean values showing agreement between the two practices and on the whole; results show that the practices were seen by participants as easier to understand than they were to use. Participants did not provide any specific comments on the ease of understanding in items intended for that function.

## **RQ 3. What are instructors' attitudes toward the reflective practices introduced in the study?**

Positive and negative reactions towards the reflective practices were collected from the open items included in the questionnaires and were coded on an ad hoc basis by the researcher. Self-observations were seen as being time intensive, a negative aspect that was brought up by both participants. Both participants also provided their views on the positive aspects of the practice: It made them more aware of a teaching practice, the exercise had an overall positive value, they would recommend the practice to colleagues, and they would attempt to engage in the practice again in the future.

Research regarding peer observations often cites affective factors that may come into play depending on cultural levels of expression, seniority levels, or other intervening variables at play in a peer dynamic (Farrell, 2018). The participants in this study did not cite this as an issue, which can be seen as a positive reaction. One participant did bring up the possibility of unpleasantness in the process, saying, "*I am quite comfortable with my peer, so it was fairly easy...However, because I had some constructive comments that I wanted to share, I had to be a bit strategic with the words I chose and how I phrased my feedback.*" Perhaps this participant was properly selective in their feedback, as their partner commented, "*I did not feel judged about what I was doing.*" Ultimately, it should be borne in mind that this pilot study included only four participants and that these comments are specific to a unique situation.

The remainder of the responses to items showed that participants had positive reactions to peer observation, with both indicating that they would recommend the practice to colleagues and attempt to engage in the practice again in the future. One participant noted, "*I'm glad we had an opportunity to both observe each other. I think this would make it easier or more comfortable to do (so) in the future.*"

## Discussion

Results have indicated that the self- and peer observation practices introduced in this study were seen as easy to use and to understand for mid-career and late-career instructors. Self-observers told the researchers that this was the first time they had engaged in the practice and indicated that they would like to continue the practice in the future, which is a very positive sign. One participant said, “*I’m feeling the self-reflective exercise would give myself what I hadn’t noticed before. Sometimes, not always, it would give me a thought-provoking experience with respect to my own teaching method flaws.*” It may be the case that this thought-provoking experience is what encourages the participant to continue with the practice or recommend it to others in the future.

Peer observers answered that while this practice was not new to them, it was one that they saw the value of frequent engagement in. One observer stated, “*I think peer observation is a very useful practice. I might change certain aspects of the process, however.*” This is a suggestion that can be applied, were this study to be undertaken again – the ability to change steps of a reflective practice. The two practices in this study were introduced in a controlled manner which was the result of attention to literature on the topics. However, it is likely that instructors will alter the practice to suit their needs in the real world. So, a nod towards flexibility would be a wise addition to future training sessions.

These results are encouraging when thinking about the role that reflective practices could play in the future for the CLS at Nagasaki University. However, this study was not without its limitations, meaning that results should be interpreted only as exploratory and not applicable to a wider population. To convert this pilot study into an actual experimental study, a number of limitations need to be addressed. First, a suitable sample would need to be gathered from the full-time and part-time instructors linked to the CLS. Following this, the questionnaire would need both revision and verification. The current version uses a bare minimum of items needed to generate an average score to rank agreement with the constructs of ease of use and ease of understanding. Increasing the number of items contributing to each average is necessary, as is balancing the currently uneven number of items being used as well. Finally, item analysis should be carried out to identify under-performing items and verify reliability of each average.

Since these reflective practices were introduced with the idea of supplementing limited faculty development sessions, it would be useful to verify the amount of time

required by each practice. Since three of four respondents indicated that the practice took more time than they had anticipated, we can consider the idea that these practices may not necessarily be time-savers. There may be other methods of ongoing PD that can be explored, which require less time of their practitioners. Another issue raised by the participants' willingness to continue the practices in the future is that of just how to encourage future use. Ideal reflective practitioners are always working on their practice, but some of the methods being used in this study, such as peer observation, require a collaborator to be effective. A future look into the possibility of continuing with the practices (e.g. assignment of peer observation partners for a semester), as well as how many repetitions are necessary to instill a routine of using reflective practices would also be beneficial in vetting these practices for future use.

### **Implications**

Based on these preliminary positive results, it is possible to make suggestions for the training of reflective practices to instructors working in the CLS. While both self-observation and peer observation are common components of pre-service teacher training programs, it is not the case that simply training teachers in these practices results in their proper use (Yesilbursa, 2011). Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that all instructors in the CLS completed similar pre-service training before becoming instructors of the English language. Evidence of this is seen in the comments of the self-observation participants who claimed that the reflective practice was unknown to them up to the point of this study. Therefore, to enable instructors working in the CLS to benefit most from the findings of this study, the following approaches are recommended by the author.

#### **1. Introduction and training in reflective practices**

To begin, all instructors in the CLS would benefit from background information regarding the importance and prevalence of reflective practices in language teaching (Farrell, 2015). Establishing these practices as essential parts of a teacher's PD toolkit should make instructors open to learning the new techniques and promote interest in their use. This background information instruction can be combined with an approximately 30-minute training similar to the ones used in this study during a faculty development session where instructors would be present. The training would help instructors understand how to enact the practice, how to follow-up on the findings of the practice, and how to evaluate the efficacy of the practice using the questionnaire piloted in this study.

## **2. Use, monitoring, and evaluation of reflective practices**

Following the training sessions, instructors could be required to utilize a reflective practice during the semester. After enacting the practice, they could meet with a supervisor who is versed in the practices to debrief on the experience or pair up with a colleague with whom they feel comfortable discussing their teaching experience. Whether experiences were found to be positive or negative, useful or ineffective, this meeting with a supervisor/colleague could reinforce that these practices are not to be used for evaluation, but simply for reflection on teaching practice. Providing a session such as this with a low affective factor may help encourage an instructor to continue to use reflective practices with their teaching in the future.

If these two steps are followed to introduce, train, and evaluate the reflective practices, the questionnaire piloted in this study could also receive adequate attention which would lead to suggestions for more effective use in the future. Methods of analyzing reflective practices could be fine-tuned so as to provide the most effective feedback possible to instructors. Further protocols can then be established to make this process even more regular and official if in fact the reflective processes are seen to be helpful.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the highly exploratory and ungeneralizable nature of this study, it can be said with caution that there is value in introducing reflective practices to the instructors in the CLS at Nagasaki University. This pilot study has shown that when they were introduced to instructors in a way that included both the foundations of reflective practices and steps for their proper implementation, the reflective practices of both self-observation and peer observation were accepted, used, and seen as favorable practices. Future versions of this study will need to employ a validated questionnaire to measure attitudes more reliably to draw stronger conclusions and enable statistical analysis. Finally, the most important requirement for future work will be to secure a representative sample of instructors at the CLS to truly see the effect that instruction in reflective practices may have for current and future teachers.

## Notes

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### **Appendices**

Appendices can be found online at: <https://tinyurl.com/yc3r98xx>