

Writing to Learn: Reflective Writing as an Educational Method for Saudi EFL Students

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Abstract—This study explores the implications of training English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in reflective writing and its impact on their writing ability. Reflective writing refers to critical analysis of an experience, recording its impact on the self, and planning the use of the newly gained knowledge. The study was conducted with 28 EFL students at a Saudi university with half of them exposed to reflective writing techniques and writing output compared in the pre-post-test design. Results showed that students in the experimental group performed noticeably better on their writing assignments showing that reflective writing holds much promise as an instructional technique for enhancing EFL students' writing abilities. The study also found that the experimental group's attitude toward writing had improved as the intervention not only improved their writing abilities but also, helped them develop a more favorable attitude toward the writing process. Finally, it is reported that no correlation was found between students' attitudes and achievement in post experiment. The study emphasizes the need of reflective writing in the EFL setting on the premise that including these techniques in the writing curriculum would likely enhance students' writing in English.

Index Terms—EFL students, output-based writing, pedagogical tool, reflective writing

I. INTRODUCTION

Given its attribute of enhancing students' critical thinking ability, self-awareness, and in-depth knowledge, reflective writing has gained much attention as an educational method (Smith, 2019). Teachers all over the world are experimenting with different educational policies for language acquisition and enhancement, especially where it concerns a foreign language (EFL) (Liu & Zhang, 2018). Reflective writing has today emerged as a great alternative with its positive effects on learners' cognitive and metacognitive processes (Brown & Lee, 2020). There is growing emphasis on the use of the latest educational technologies to fulfil the ultimate need for language proficiency in central, east, and North Africa (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2015). Countries in these regions are updating their curricula to include those techniques which not only enhance language proficiency but also, self-efficacy and a positive attitude to learning (Suleiman, 2017). In this scenario, reflective writing has established its place in the MENA colleges as an effective tool (Ahmed & Abouabdelkader, 2016). In Saudi Arabia particularly, EFL methodologies are undergoing much change. The Vision 2030 document (which highlights the value of education and welcomes educational reforms) has encouraged institutions to look for the latest developments in teaching pedagogies (Al-Seghayer, 2018). In this context, reflective writing is a veritable influencer in improving the writing abilities and attitudes to learning of university students (Alrabai, 2017).

However, despite the acknowledged benefits of reflective writing, there is still a dearth of concrete examples, particularly in the Saudi Arabian setting (Ahdal & Alqasham, 2020). Traditional output-based writing procedures are the primary emphasis of current instructional methodologies, perhaps neglecting the many advantages that reflective practices may provide. This study seeks to close the empirical gap by contrasting conventional writing techniques with reflective writing practices in the EFL environment of a Saudi institution by investigating how reflective writing affects students' attitudes about writing as well as how effective it is at improving performance. As they work to improve EFL teaching methods, educators, politicians, and curriculum designers, both inside and outside of Saudi Arabia, may find the conclusions drawn from this study to be quite helpful. This study explores these queries:

Research questions

1. How does the inclusion of reflective writing practices affect EFL students' writing performance when compared with conventional output-based writing techniques?
2. What are the differences in attitudes of Saudi EFL students exposed to reflective writing methods as compared to those exposed to standard output-based writing techniques?
3. Does encouraging reflective writing in EFL students lead to a more positive attitude toward the writing process? If yes, how does this attitude show itself in their writing output and impressions of themselves?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Reflective writing, which has a strong foundation in constructivism, has long been seen as a key tool in the teaching and learning process (Dewey, 1933; Piaget, 1967). The integration of reflective methods with EFL education becomes crucial because language learning, especially in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) milieu, lays great emphasis

on students actively creating knowledge. Writing instruction in EFL has traditionally been centered on the language's bare mechanics, stressing correctness and respect for structural standards (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Despite being helpful in building a strong foundation in linguistic patterns, such output-based writing tactics frequently ignore the dynamic, cognitive interaction inherent in the process of writing (Hyland, 2003). In contrast, reflective writing goes beyond these mechanics and encourages students to analyze, assess, and create meaning in order to provide a deeper understanding and enjoyment of the language (Moon, 2006). By distinguishing between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, Schön (1983) broadened the scope of Dewey's (1933) pioneering work on reflection and demonstrated how professionals, including educators, continually engage with and learn from their experiences, the most basic characteristic of the reflective model. Such introspective procedures are very important in the field of EFL. Reflecting on their written work while language learners wrestle with the subtleties of a foreign tongue enables them to manage the cultural, social, and contextual complexities that a new language usually entails, as well as to pinpoint knowledge gaps (Vygotsky, 1978). The sociocultural foundations of language learning have been deeply addressed by Vygotsky (1978) who also proposed a new outlook to language as a channel of thinking and social interaction and not merely as a medium of communication. Taking this idea forward, reflective writing enables EFL students to find their place in the larger linguistic community while simultaneously engaging in sociocultural discussion (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Research in contemporary times has begun to look at the specific effects of reflective writing, for instance, Yu and Li (2015) concluded that there was metacognitive development in those students who had used reflective writing technique as in addition to language enhancement; it had enhanced their awareness of the learning pathways. In another study, Zhang and Zhou (2020) found in a study of the comprehensive benefits of this technique, and how it had positively impacted their engagement and motivation. Despite of these recorded benefits, there are also some claims to the contrary. Most notable is the claim that too much scaffolding in shallow reflection may lead to the students not moving in the desirable direction, and ultimately not real learning will happen (Smith & Hatton, 2007). Therefore, there is a need for a balanced and thought-out strategy to ensure that reflective writing is not at the cost of learner-centeredness, and the onus for this lies on the supervision and knowledge of the teachers. One reliable conclusion is that reflective writing has the potential to be a ground-breaking and highly influential component of the EFL curriculum, bringing in its wake language competency but also a variety of cognitive, metacognitive, and sociocultural pros.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Piaget (1967) and Vygotsky's (1978) constructivist epistemology which theorizes that new knowledge is built on learners' prior knowledge and that learning is a dynamic process. The utilization of reflective writing as a pedagogical method within this framework positions the learner as the central point of the learning process, fostering a more profound and self-reflective comprehension of the subject matter (Dewey, 1933). Aligned with Schön's (1983) reflective practice theory, this methodology asserts that individuals engage in an ongoing conversation with their experiences, aiming to facilitate cognitive restructuring and enhance understanding. The intricacies of acquiring a foreign language are closely interconnected with cognitive, metacognitive, and social facets of learning, particularly for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students (Flavell, 1979). This is consistent with the sociocultural hypothesis put forward by Vygotsky (1978), which contends that serving as a bridge, reflective writing empowers students to delve into their cognitive processes, evaluate their understanding, rectify any misconceptions, and strategically plan for future interactions. The acquisition of language, especially in an EFL setting, is markedly influenced by social interactions and cultural contexts, beyond just linguistic proficiency. Reflective writing serves as a conduit for these connections, providing students with a platform to deliberate on meanings, grasp cultural nuances, and carve out their role within the broader linguistic community (Zimmerman, 2002). Moreover, reflective writing empowers students to assume control over their learning journey by setting objectives, monitoring their progress, and adapting strategies. This process aligns with the self-regulated learning framework, enabling students to navigate the complexities of EFL effectively (Wenden, 1987). Combining constructivist concepts with reflective practice in the EFL environment, where language serves as both a tool and a goal, gives birth to a comprehensive, student-centered approach. The incorporation of these theoretical ideas confirms reflective writing's relevance as a transformational pedagogical tool in EFL instruction, promising to promote not just stronger language abilities but also, a proactive, upbeat attitude toward the learning process.

III. METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study uses a quasi-experimental method to verify the effectiveness of reflective writing techniques in comparison to conventional output-based writing. The reason for choosing this method is that it is considered appropriate when researchers want to prove a causal link between the intervention (reflective writing) and the outcomes (writing performance and attitudes toward writing), but they are unable to randomly assign subjects to control and experimental groups (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The study was conducted in the academic year 1445 AH.

Participants

28 EFL students at a university in Saudi Arabia comprised the study sample. Purposeful sampling method was applied to isolate the sample as the scope of the study required a homogenous group with common traits or experiences (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). The participants were divided equally into control and experimental groups at the beginning of the treatment to ascertain the level of enhancement in each group and whether the intervention on the experiential group

helped significantly develop the students' writing skills. The purpose of the research was shared with the participants at the beginning of the experiment and their consent was duly obtained.

Instruments

The following two main research tools were used: (1) Writing Performance Assessment which is a standardized rubric used to assess students' writing based on criteria like coherence, grammar, vocabulary, organization, and creativity; and (2) Attitude Towards Writing Survey which is a Likert-scale based questionnaire used to assess students' attitudes toward the writing process, assessing factors like enjoyment, perceived difficulty, and confidence. A pre-test was given to both groups at the beginning of the experiment to ascertain their initial writing abilities and attitudes. The control group then undertook conventional output-based writing tasks over a predetermined length of time, whereas the experimental group was subjected to reflective writing tasks. A post-test was given after the intervention period to assess how, if any, writing skills and attitudes had changed.

Data analysis

SPSS (Version 25) software was used to examine quantitative data from the pre-post-tests and the attitude questionnaire. An independent-samples t-test was used to evaluate differences between the mean scores of the control and experimental groups, and a paired-samples t-test was used to compare pre-test and post-test scores within groups, with significance established at $p=0.05$. Results were computed in aggregates, making it impossible to identify particular participants, and all data was coded in order to ensure anonymity.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1: How does the inclusion of reflective writing practices affect EFL students' writing performance when compared with conventional output-based writing techniques?

Table 1 illustrates the pre- and post-test changes in the students' writing performance evaluations following the implementation of reflective writing. The mean score on the pre-test was 13.24, with a standard deviation (SD) of 2.32, situating the participants at the "Intermediate" level (11-15) according. In contrast, the post-test mean score increased to 16.34 with a slightly higher standard deviation of 2.43, elevating the students' performance to the "Advanced" level (16-20). As the p-value (0.002) is less than the significance threshold of 0.05, the results indicate a statistically significant improvement in the writing performance of students who used reflective writing. The t value of -3.1, with a degree of freedom (df) of 38, highlights the significance of this enhancement.

TABLE 1
PRE-TEST POST-TEST DIFFERENCE ON THE WRITING PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT

<i>Writing Performance Scores</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>	<i>T value</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p value</i>
Pre-test	13.24	2.32	Intermediate	-3.1	38	0.002 *
Post-test	16.34	2.43	Advance			

*= significant at 0.05 level; ns= not significant at 0.05 level

Legend: Advance (16-20), Intermediate (11-15), Basic (6-10), Beginner (1-5).

RQ2: What are the differences in attitudes of Saudi EFL students exposed to reflective writing methods as compared to those exposed to standard output-based writing techniques?

Table 2 compares the writing attitudes of students prior to and following the implementation of reflective writing. Clearly, there has been a significant transformation in the students' outlook to writing. The average mean score for the pre-test was 3.56 with a standard deviation (SD) of 0.37, which was interpreted as "High". The post-test average mean score increased to 4.58 with a standard deviation of 0.31, placing it in the "Very High" category. The increase in the mean score from the pre-test to the post-test, from "High" to "Very High" attitude indicates a positive change in the students' attitudes toward writing as a result of the reflective writing intervention. This change can be attributed to the reflective writing process, which may have enabled students to engage more deeply with their thoughts, emotions, and experiences, thereby fostering a more positive attitude toward the writing process. In addition, the smaller standard deviation on the post-test compared to the pre-test suggests that students' responses were more consistent after using reflective writing. This suggests that reflective writing not only enhanced the participants' general attitude toward writing, but also produced a more uniformly positive perception among them. At a 0.05 level, the T-value of -1, with 38 degrees of freedom and a p-value of 0.001, is statistically significant. This indicates that the difference between pre- and post-intervention attitudes is statistically significant. In other words, students felt more positively about writing after using reflective writing, and not by coincidence or by accident.

TABLE 2
SAUDI EFL STUDENTS' ATTITUDES BEFORE AND AFTER THE USE OF REFLECTIVE WRITING

<i>Attitude</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>	<i>T Value</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>P</i>
Pre-test	3.56	0.37	High	-1	38	<0.001*
Post-test	4.58	0.31	Very High			

*= significant at 0.05 level; ns= not significant at 0.05 level

Legend: 4.20-5.00: Very High/ Strongly Agree/ 3.40-4.19: High/ Agree/ 2.60-3.39 Moderate/ Undecided/ 1.80- 2.59: Low/ Disagree/ 1.79: Very Low/ Strongly Disagree

RQ3: Does encouraging reflective writing in EFL students lead to a more positive attitude toward the writing process? If yes, how does this attitude show itself in their writing output and impressions of themselves?

The relationship between students' attitude post-intervention toward writing and their post-writing performance scores when using reflective writing is depicted in Table 3. The average writing performance score was 16.34, while the average writing attitude score was 4.58, and -0.0836 was the correlation coefficient (R) between writing ability and attitude. This correlation has a P-value of .736, which is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. The negative correlation coefficient indicates a modest inverse relationship between students' attitudes toward writing and their writing performance. This suggests that as an individual's outlook improves, their writing performance may change, and vice versa. This relationship is feeble and not statistically significant, as indicated by the P-value of .736, which is significantly greater than the significance threshold of .05.

TABLE 3
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE STUDENTS' ATTITUDE POST-INTERVENTION AND POST-WRITING PERFORMANCE SCORES ON THE UTILIZATION OF REFLECTIVE WRITING

Variables	Mean	R	P-value
Writing Performance	16.34	-0836	.736 ns
Writing Attitude	4.58		

*= significant at 0.05 level; ns= not significant at 0.05 level

The absence of correlation between students' attitudes toward writing and their writing performance when using reflective writing may appear surprising. One might intuitively assume that a more positive attitude toward writing would be associated with improved performance. However, this result suggests that other factors may be more influential than attitude alone in determining writing performance. It is also conceivable that the reflective writing process itself does not resonate equally with all students, resulting in a more nuanced relationship between attitude and performance. The potential presence of confounding variables that were not controlled for or considered in this analysis is another factor to consider. These results suggest to educators that merely boosting students' attitudes toward writing may not necessarily result in improved writing performance when applying reflective writing. In the context of reflective writing, it may be more beneficial to consider other pedagogical strategies or interventions that address the specific challenges and requirements of students. In addition, it may be beneficial to investigate why some students with a positive attitude toward writing do not necessarily perform better. It may be likely that they confront additional obstacles or challenges that reflective writing does not address. Consistent with those findings, the findings of this study indicate that, while attitude is essential, it is not the sole predictor of success in writing tasks. This study differs from other studies that concluded that in the context of writing, performance was affected by attitude, on the contrary, no such correlation could be found in this case. This difference in findings shows that context is an important factor to be considered when analyzing the factors that influence writing performance.

The major finding of this study is that reflective writing has significant impact on developing Saudi EFL students' writing skills. This improvement is significant as it elevated them from an intermediate to an advanced level of writing performance showing the potential of reflective writing as a pedagogical instrument for improving students' writing skills. The principal discovery of this research indicates that reflective writing exerts a substantial influence on enhancing the writing skills of Saudi EFL students. This notable improvement is particularly noteworthy as it pushes them from an intermediate to an advanced level of writing proficiency, underscoring the efficacy of reflective writing as a pedagogical tool for elevating students' writing abilities (Anderson, 2018; Bin-Hady et al., 2021; Jones & Ryan, 2017; Smith, 2019). Students are regularly motivated to assess and internalize their learning experiences through the practice of reflective writing. The results of this study offer essential insights into the efficacy of reflective writing as an instructional approach for improving both students' writing performance and their attitudes towards the learning process (Albelihi & Al-Ahdal, 2022; Jones & Ryan, 2017; Smith, 2019). Significant enhancements in both domains are evident post-intervention, aligning with a broader body of research that underscores the positive impacts of incorporating reflective practices in educational settings (Anderson, 2018). Consistently, reflective writing has been recognized as a vital tool for cultivating critical thinking, self-awareness, and a more profound engagement with course content. Within this study, the enhancement in writing performance from an "Intermediate" to an "Advanced" level post-intervention implies that reflective writing goes beyond merely serving as a platform for self-expression. It works as a cognitive tool, promoting a more profound interaction with the subject matter and a better presentation of ideas. This is consistent with the findings of Anderson (2018), noted that reflective practices aid students in consolidating their learning, thereby boosting their ability to express intricate ideas in writing. Additionally, it is noteworthy that the intervention resulted in a substantial change in students' attitudes toward writing. Moreover, the study revealed no significant correlation between students' attitudes and their academic achievement. This finding diverges from numerous prior studies that suggested a positive relationship between favorable dispositions towards academic tasks and increased engagement and performance (Brown & Ryan, 2016). However, our findings, which indicate an enhanced but insignificant correlation between attitude and writing performance, suggest a more nuanced relationship. This is consistent with the findings of Martin and Dowson (2019) argued that while a positive attitude is a crucial element of academic success, it may not always have a direct and explicit correlation with performance. Various factors, including prior experiences, feedback received, or personal challenges, can significantly impact performance outcomes. Though it may appear

counterintuitive, while it is commonly believed that a positive attitude precedes improved academic performance (Smith, 2019), our findings suggest that this relationship may not be linear. The existence of this non-linear relationship has been corroborated by several earlier studies. For instance, Jackson (2020) found that in specific contexts, students with high confidence and positive attitudes may refrain from exerting the necessary effort, under the belief that a positive attitude is adequate by itself. This could elucidate the subtle, non-significant correlation observed in our study. Additionally noteworthy is the variance in standard deviations between pre- and post-test scores in both writing performance and attitude. Moreover, a diminished standard deviation in students' attitudes implies that following the reflective writing intervention, there was increased consistency in both scores and attitudes. This hints at reflective writing having a normalizing effect, potentially benefiting a broader range of students beyond those who are already predisposed to writing (Jones & Ryan, 2017). The ramifications of the study findings are extensive. Educators should first consider incorporating reflective writing exercises into their curricula in light of their demonstrated ability to improve writing performance and attitudes. However, they should do so with the knowledge that attitude improvements may not directly translate into performance enhancements. Consequently, while cultivating positive attitudes is essential, educators should also prioritize other pedagogical strategies that directly target performance enhancement. In addition, the study highlights the significance of context when interpreting results. While reflective writing demonstrated significant benefits in our context, educators implementing similar interventions should first consider the specific needs and challenges of their students. It would be advantageous for future research to investigate the fundamental causes of the observed mild negative correlation between attitude and performance. To gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences with reflective writing, qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups could be employed.

These attributes of self-reflection and critical thinking enabled the students to develop a deep understanding of the subject matter, better organization and expression of ideas, together improving their writing scores. By writing reflectively on a regular basis, students can improve their cognitive abilities, be more aware of the shortcomings in their learning strategies, and improve their expression. These findings are in line with available research which emphasizes the role of reflection in enhancing students' understanding and perceptions. For instance, studies have shown that reflective practice helps bridge the gap between theory and practice, which in turn, can enable students to form logical connections and internalize knowledge more effectively. This study adds to the impressive literature that supports the inclusion of reflective writing.

These results also point out that reflective writing practice can motivate students to be more receptive to knowledge and it also enhances critical thinking and self-reflection. The consistency demonstrated by the post-test suggests that reflective writing can be a universal tool for a large number of students in different foreign language contexts. Reflective writing is by its very nature individualized and introspective. Writing becomes more than just a mechanical activity for kids as they become involved with their ideas, emotions, and experiences. Finally, this study has consequences outside of the immediate classroom setting. Learners' future academic and professional activities might benefit from reflective techniques.

V. CONCLUSION

Reflective writing as a pedagogical instrument has demonstrated tangible benefits in terms of enhancing students' writing abilities and attitudes toward writing. Students exhibited progress from intermediate to advanced writing performance levels and from a high to a very high attitude towards writing as a result of a reflective writing intervention. This improvement demonstrates that reflective writing has the potential to enhance students' learning experiences and foster a more favorable attitude toward writing. However, the study also reveals a compelling paradox in the form of a negligible negative correlation between students' attitudes toward writing and their performance. This may appear counterintuitive at first, but it highlights the intricate relationship between attitude and performance, suggesting that other factors, whether external or intrinsic to the learning environment, play crucial roles in determining writing outcomes. Despite of the positive link that this study has established between reflective writing and heightened writing output, learning motivation, and learner engagement, the link (or lack thereof) between attitude and performance warrants additional exploration. This absence of correlation implies that, despite the importance of nurturing a positive mindset, it may not directly translate to enhanced writing proficiency, especially within the realm of reflective writing. This notion points to the multifaceted nature of writing skills, shaped by a complex interplay of factors, where some are more visible than others.

Reflective writing stands out as a promising pedagogical tool with the potential to significantly enhance students' writing skills and foster positive attitudes towards the writing process. However, given the delicate and pristine cultural and educational scenario of KSA, its integration into the educational institutions demand careful adaptation. Technology, teachers' training, and ongoing guidance will also need to be carefully implemented to ensure its success. Moreover, addressing the gap between attitude and actual performance calls for the development of targeted interventions. Sustained engagement with diverse student populations, the adoption of long-term assessment models, qualitative analysis, and a thorough examination of external determinants are imperative as we strive to unlock the full potential of reflective writing in Saudi Arabia. Drawing comparisons with other educational strategies in this context will allow us to discern its relative merits and determine the most effective modes of integration. Embracing context-

specific, evidence-based approaches will undoubtedly contribute to holistic student development as the educational landscape in Saudi Arabia continues to evolve.

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