

Using reflective journals to promote authentic learning in an English writing course#

مساهمة كتابة المجلات التأملية في تنمية قدرات الطلبة ومهاراتهم في تعلم مهارات كتابة اللغة الانجليزية

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Abstract

This study reports on the contribution of reflective journal writing to students' development of knowledge and skills in authentic learning of BA students in a Hebron University, Palestine (n=76). The research was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative methods to ascertain the nature and the impact that reflective writing and reflective journals may have upon the quality of student teachers' reflection upon five dimensions of authentic learning. The results obtained from the questionnaires and the analysis of the reflective journals revealed that students held positive attitudes towards the journal reflection process with regard to all five dimensions. Participants generally viewed their experiences in reflective journal writing to be valuable and enjoyable.

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They particularly valued the active involvement and personal ownership as supportive to improving their language skills.

Keywords: Reflective Writing, Creativity and Critical Thinking, Authentic Learning, Experiential Learning

ملخص

هدفت هذه الدراسة لمعرفة مدى مساهمة كتابة المجالات التأملية في تنمية قدرات الطلبة ومهاراتهم في تعلم مهارات كتابة اللغة الانجليزية في جامعة الخليل. تم إجراء البحث باستخدام كل من الأساليب الكمية والنوعية على مجموعة من الطلبة بلغ عددها 76 طالبا وطالبة للتأكد من طبيعة وتأثير الكتابة التأملية على جودة تفكير الطلبة ضمن خمسة محاور تعليمية. كشفت النتائج التي تم الحصول عليها من الاستبانات وتحليل المقالات التأملية أن الطلبة ابدوا مواقف إيجابية تجاه عملية كتابة المقالات التأملية. رأى المشاركون بشكل عام أن خبراتهم في كتابة المقالات التأملية ذات قيمة وممتعة. لقد قدروا بشكل خاص محاور المشاركة النشطة والملكية الشخصية كداعمين لتحسين مهاراتهم اللغوية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكتابة التأملية، الإبداع والتفكير النقدي، التعلم التجريبي.

Introduction

One of the challenges in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) is to involve learners in meaningful authentic tasks to enable them to communicate effectively. Willis (1996) states that using the language with meaningful purposes is one way to construct an engaging learning setting. Thus, the main objective in language learning process is to provide learners with tasks and strategies that provide a valuable alternative and engage students in a meaningful context. One way to support authentic learning is through offering learner's meaningful situations to reflect. Reflective journals are used by the learners to express their views on daily activities and personal experiences.

Many studies report that reflective journal writing is important for learners (Ahmed, 2019; Moore, 2010; Tuan, 2010; Graham, 2003; Estrada, & Abdul Rahman, 2014; Dymont, & O'Connell, 2003; Boud, 2011; Rozimela & Tiarina, 2018). Moreover, some researchers reported better performance for learners (Capar, 2014; Dymont & O'Connell, 2003; Lee, 2007; Farrah, 2012; Haynes-Mays, Peltier Glaze & Broussard,

2011; Stevens and Cooper, 2009; Tuan, 2010; Williams, 2008). However, most studies on reflection focus on comparing learning with or without using reflection and hardly include the contribution of reflection on authentic learning experiences in EFL. Reflective journal writing is not common in Palestinian schools and universities as most instructors still use exams as major means to assess students. Moreover, there is limited practice and research on reflective journal writing in Palestine. However, educational practice is shifting from facts and isolated knowledge to active and authentic learning, in which a positive culture in the learning process is fostered, to promote critical thinking, and develop students' writing abilities. There is a need to use authentic ways of teaching and assessment to make learning more meaningful for students and enable them to develop a personal relationship with the course material. Reflective journal writing could support Palestinian students in learning the language in an authentic way.

This study focuses on writing reflective journals in a Writing Course at Hebron University. The purpose is to investigate how reflective journal writing supports authentic language learning.

Literature review

Reflection and reflective journal writing

Much has been written about reflection, and the bulk of research has been carried out in educational contexts (Price 2004). Some of the benefits of writing reflective journals include cognitive and affective development (language learning skills development), promote critical thinking and develop writing abilities of students making connections between class material, lectures, and personal observations, active engagement with issues that can fuel classroom discussion, connecting with self and others by linking personal reactions to the class material, provide a forum for inquiry, analysis, and evaluation of ideas (Stevenson and Cooper, 2009; Graham, 2003; Greiman & Convington, 2007; Hemmati & Soltanpour, 2012; O'Connell and Dymont, 2003; Sen, 2010; Watson, 2010; Khanjani, Vahdany & Jafarigohar, 2018). Most studies suggest that reflection provides opportunities for learners to reflect on

their learning experiences and to make sound judgments. Dewey (1938) already has encouraged learning experiences that stimulate meaningful learning and stated that active engagement of learners with the material can lead to effective learning. The process of reflective journal writing provides learners with plenty of opportunities to share their ideas and engage in a meaningful learning process. Vygotsky (1986) has indicated that reflective journal writing allows learners to interact with the text and make connections between themselves and what is happening in the world around them.

We can find a number of definitions from different sources in the literature for reflection. Reflective journals are defined as basically written records that learners construct while they think about numerous thoughts learnt and about interactions between learners and instructors during the educational process (Thorpe, 2004). According to Lee (2002) reflection is a psychological action of meta-cognition that is distributed over three types: evaluation, cognition, and comparison. These types of reflection are represented in a popular model for reflection of Gibbs (1998). He presented a reflective cycle which includes six stages, where in stage one (experience), learners actively experience certain activities and they reflect upon their feelings in the second stage (feelings). In the third stage (evaluation), learners evaluate the factors that influenced their behaviour, feelings, beliefs and values and attempt to sightsee justifications concerning the meaning of the experience. Learners think about the positive experiences and the ones that may need impartments. In stage four (analysis), they try to analyse their experiences with the aim of achieving better interpretations, or understandings of their experiences. Finally, in stage five and six (conclusion and action plans), learners make their sound judgments and plan for a new circle of reflective thinking.

Hiemstra (2001) states that journal writing in its different practices is a means of recording interests, personal thoughts, and everyday experiences. He elaborates that it contains written interaction between the writer and herself, another person, or even an imagined individual. It gives the learners the opportunity to interact and communicate with

others through sharing opinions and ideas, seeking others' help, or conveying meaning on paper with the self. Kose (2005) has examined the influence of using journals on language anxiety. He found that using journals in English writing courses had supported learners' writing. Lee (2007) emphasized that journals offer "a venue for teacher learners to establish connections between content and practical experience" (p. 321). Yoshihara (2008) has conducted a study to examine the impact of writing journals on building a relationship based on trust among teachers and their students. The study revealed that writing journals established good and significant relationship among teachers and their students.

Reflective journal writing and authentic learning

Park (2003) believes that reflective journal writing provides learners with opportunities to experience authentic learning as they can have meaningful communication with their teachers. In an anxiety free environment, learners assume a very central role in the learning route and they can assess themselves and monitor their progress. Furthermore, some studies suggest that reflective journal writing helps learners to evaluate their learning experiences (Iucu & Marin, 2014; Stevens & Cooper, 2009). Iucu and Marin (2014) have stated that reflective journal writing can be used by learners to evaluate learning experiences and challenges, which they experience and that might hinder their learning. Stevens and Cooper (2009) and Thorpe (2004) have explained how journal writing strategies can be used to support active learning. Capar (2014) and Dymont and O'Connell (2003) reported how reflective journal writing can be used by learners to reflect on their writing performance. According to Capar (2014), reflection on writing is more difficult for learners than reflection on any other language skill or activity. He assumes this might be a reason why most learners are unsuccessful when it comes to practising reflection in writing. Therefore, he believes that writing teachers should be a source of help in this respect and gradually teach and train their students to reflect on their writing performance. This may successfully empower learners to plan, draft, revise, and organize their written performance in future. Other studies have suggested that reflective journal writing helps in recording daily

events, reflection and reaction to personal experiences (Dyment & O'Connell 2003). Boud (2011), Hubbs and Brand (2005) believe that reflective journaling is an effective approach for serving learners in the direction of advanced stages of critical thinking, active participation, and personal comprehension. Reflective journaling enables learners to be engaged in a learning process that allows learners to be involved in an authentic way to present and manage what they have attained in the classroom sessions. Finally, other studies have highlighted the importance of reflective journal writing in building learners' self-confidence. Graham (2003) believes that reflective journal writing builds students' self- confidence and competence in their writing. Similarly, Spalding and Wilson (2002) mention some positive effects for journaling as "serving as a permanent record of thoughts and experiences, providing a means of establishing and maintaining relationship with instructors, serving as a safe outlet for personal concerns and frustrations; and, as an aid to internal dialogue" (p. 1396).

Impact of reflective journal writing on learning

Several researchers have examined the use of reflective journal learning and its impact on the learning process. Some of the studies have emphasized the role of reflective journal writing in active involvement and personal ownership of learning (Lew & Schmidt, 2007; Williams, 2008). Lew and Schmidt (2007) found that reflective journals offer opportunities for learners to reflect on their learning. Williams (2008) found that reflective journal writing maximized participation inside the class, and contributed to a better academic achievement, and provided learners with opportunities to interact with the subject matter. Similarly, O'Connell and Dyment (2003) and Greiman and Convington (2007) emphasized the role of reflective journal writing in promoting creativity and critical thinking skills. For example, O'Connell and Dyment (2003) have examined how writing journals may promote learners' writing and critical thinking skills. They have found that writing reflective journal stimulates critical thinking skills. Greiman and Convington (2007) have recognized reflective thinking as a major outcome of reflective journal writing. Similarly, Sen (2010) suggests that the most significant benefit is

that learners “were most analytical in their reflection and expressed that in deeply analytical reflective writing” (p. 91). Reflective journal writing helps learners in the understanding of their own learning. Moore et al. (2010) have found that writing reflective journals help learners think critically about their learning. According to Stevens and Cooper (2009), learners who write regularly in a journal see progress in their writing skills, as well as their creative and reflective thinking. According to Schon (1987), journal writing has a crucial role in improving learning skills and training learners to formulate new ideas and viewpoints where they can explore and practice skills learned in class. Tuan (2010) has examined means of overcoming writing intricacies by involving learners in writing journals. He demonstrated that learners who kept journals achieved better post-test writing scores than learners with no such writing activity. Moreover, Haynes-Mays, Peltier Glaze and Broussard (2011) have conducted a study to examine the effect of journal writing language development and literacy among African American learners. They found that students were able to learn language in manner that is non-threatening and their writing ability improved.

Other studies have highlighted how reflective journal writing facilitates the learning experience. According to Steffy, Wolfe, Pasch, and Enz, (2000) reflective practice facilitates learning, revitalization, and development. Chickering and Reisser (1993) have stated that “learning is the process that students must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives” (pp. 374-375). Other researchers have examined the impact of reflective journal writing on valuing personal observation and knowledge (Estrada & Abdul Rahman, 2014).

Reflective journal writing and learning EFL

Although there are many studies on the influence of reflective journal writing on learning processes in general, only few studies investigated the influence of reflective journal writing on EFL. Hemmati and Soltanpour (2012) have conducted a study to compare the impact of writing reflective learning portfolios and journals on the accuracy of writing and performance of Iranian EFL learners. The experiment lasted

for fourteen training classes. They divided the learners into two experimental groups. They demonstrated that the performance of reflective learning portfolios groups and their scores were statistically significant and superior to the other experimental group. Likewise, Watson (2010) has stated that reflective journals help learners apply their learning to their real lives. He found that his students in an academic writing course had profound reflection on classroom activities which contributed to their improved performance in the course.

Lee (2007) investigated the impact of writing journals on the reflective practice of thirty-one pre-service EFL teacher trainees from two Hong Kong universities. She examined how reflection can be encouraged among pre-service teachers by using dialogue journals and response journals. The experiment continued for two semesters and the participants were divided into two groups: dialogue journals which were written by the first group and response journals which were written by the second group. The findings demonstrated the benefits of the journal writing process and how response and dialogue journals offered prospects for participants to be involved in a cycle of reflective practice. Khanjani, Vahdany and Jafarigohar (2018), in the same vein, conducted a study on 24 EFL teacher trainees to examine the impact of writing journals on their reflective practice. They reported a significant difference between the perceptions of participants and their implementation of reflective practice before and after treatment. They found that writing journals has noteworthy effects on promoting reflective practice. Additionally, they found a significant difference between participants' perceptions and application of reflective practice before and after treatment. According to them, reflective journals assisted prospective teachers in understanding particular essential topics and improved their appreciative experiences in creating better personal dialogues.

The aim of the present study

The present study aims to investigate how reflective journal writing supports EFL students in language learning in an authentic context. In the literature (Moore, 2010; Tuan, 2010; Graham, 2003; Dymont, &

O’Connell, 2003; Boud, 2011; Rozimela & Tiarina, 2018; Capar, 2014; Lee, 2007; Farrah, 2012; Steffy, Wolfe, Pasch, & Enz, 2000, Estrada & Abdul Rahman, 2014, Watson, 2010, Hemmati & Soltanpour, 2012; Stevens and Cooper, 2009; Williams, 2008) five dimensions of authentic learning were found in which reflective journal writing can reflect authentic learning experiences were found to which reflective journal writing might contribute to learners:

- Active involvement and personal ownership of learning
- Creativity and critical thinking skills
- Understanding of our own learning
- Facilitating of the learning experience
- Valuing personal observation and knowledge

The main question of this study is:

“In which ways does reflective journal writing during an English writing course support Palestinian pre-service teachers at Hebron University in authentic language learning?”

To answer the main question, two sub questions were developed:

1. To what extent do pre-service teachers perceive that reflective journal writing influences their language learning with regard to dimensions of authentic learning?
2. How do pre-service teachers describe their learning experiences through reflective journal writing?

Method

Participants

Seventy-six students (11 males and 65 female) constituted the population of the study. The students belonged to two writing classes. They were taught by two instructors. The students' ages ranged from 18 to 21 years old and they were from two sections of a writing course during the summer semester of the academic year 2017/2018.

Table 1 presents the details of the participants (demographic information and some students' writing practices) as elicited from Part One in the Questionnaire.

Table (1): Students' demographic data.

Variables		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	11	14.5
	Female	65	85.5
	Total	76	100
Level	Second Year	55	72.4
	Third Year	21	27.6
	Total	76	100
General Point Average (GPA)	60-69	2	2.6
	70-79	25	9.32
	80-89	43	56.6
	90+	6	7.9
	Total	76	100
I practise writing in English	Every day	6	7.9
	Twice a week	32	42.1
	Once a week	31	40.8
	Twice a month	4	5.3
	Once a month	3	3.9
	Total	76	100

As Table 1 reveals, the majority of the respondents were females (85,5%). This is consistent with the overall population of Hebron University, Palestine. Most of the participants were in their second year (72.4%). The majority of the participants' GPAs (General Point Average) ranged from 70 to 90. Most students practised writing journals once or twice a week.

Instruments

Data for this study were collected through a questionnaire and analyses of students' reflections on the process of reflective journal

writing. To answer the first research question, a questionnaire was developed, consisting of 23 statements using Likert's 5-point scale. The researchers structured the statements based on five dimensions of authentic learning (Steffy, Wolfe, Pasch, & Enz, 2000, Estrada & Abdul Rahman, 2014, Watson, 2010, Hemmati & Soltanpour, 2012). Each dimension consisted of three to seven statements (See Appendix I).

To answer the second research question, the learners were asked to answer an open question in the questionnaire by writing six adjectives to express their experience about reflective journal writing. Additionally, they were asked to write down if they had any concerns about their reflective journal writing experience (See Appendix I).

The content validity of the questionnaire was examined by three experts from Hebron University. They suggested some changes to the questionnaire format, consistency of the tenses and merging certain items into one item. The researchers incorporated their suggestions and made the necessary changes in the final questionnaire.

Cronbach Alpha Coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.81, which means that the instrument has a high degree of internal consistency.

Procedure

The writing course was an introductory course on academic writing with a focus on how to write short, coherent texts making appropriate use of paragraph divisions. Students are taught the nature and purpose of the paragraph and are guided to write one according to a variety of purposes (contrastive, descriptive, etc.) using clear, correct and logically related sentences. Writing students are urged to review and assess the accuracy and effectiveness of their own writing and that of others. They are expected to write unified, coherent, well-developed and error-free texts making appropriate use of paragraph divisions. Moreover, they are required to write weekly reflective journals.

The journals were written in English. During the writing course, the students were required to write weekly journals as homework for which they were encouraged to reflect upon topics of their own choice and to

generate personal connections to the course content according to the reflection model of Gibbs (1998).

Steps that the students used for writing reflective journals

- Step one: The students were encouraged to write about their experiences for every session. They wrote about the things that they were confident about as well as anything they found difficult.
- Step two: The students identified the main themes and looked at what they had written.
- Step three: The students discussed the factors that influenced their behaviour and experience that included their feelings, beliefs and values.
- Step four: The students made connections to their previous experiences and tried to think how the new experience might reflect the previous experiences.
- Step five: students were encouraged to write a reflection on their journal writing.

By the end of the summer semester, most students wrote eight journals. At the end of the semester they wrote a reflection on the whole process. The researchers administered the questionnaire at the end of the summer semester 2017/2018.

Data Analysis

For the questionnaire descriptive statistics were calculated in SPSS (version 22). The quantitative analysis of the questionnaire data was triangulated with the information obtained from the reflections on students' journals. The qualitative analysis of the reflections was conducted through building emerging themes. The researchers identified the themes and descriptive category groups in several steps. First, the core ideas in each reflection were highlighted, together with similar and interrelated ideas or concepts. A number of themes emerged like increased motivation, improved language skills, better communication of

ideas, increased creativity and critical thinking, self-directed and independent learning, and better expression of feelings and emotions.

These were classified into categories. Appendix II contains two examples of the coding of themes in students' reflections. The reflections are referred to as RJ1, RJ2, etc., for the different participants.

Results

The extent to which pre-service teachers perceive that reflective journal writing influences their language learning

Analyses of the questionnaires indicate extent to which students perceived that the different dimensions of authentic learning supported their language learning.

Table (2): Students' perceptions on how reflective journal writing supports their language learning (N= 76).

Dimensions of authentic learning	M*	SD
Active involvement and personal ownership of learning	4.01	.49
Creativity and critical thinking skills	3.93	.52
Understanding of our own learning	4.00	.50
Facilitation of the learning experience	3.90	.37
Valuing personal observation and knowledge	3.87	.39

**Means on a 5-point-scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree*

With regard to the first dimension of authentic learning, *active involvement and personal ownership of learning*, Table 2 shows that students strongly agree (4.01) that reflective journal writing supports them. Statements for this dimension that received the highest scores were: "Reflective journal writing helped me to talk about my experiences" and "Reflective journal writing helped me express my ideas and opinions".

With regard to the second dimension of authentic learning, *understanding of our own learning*, Table 2 shows that students strongly agree (4.00) that reflective journal writing helps them. Statements for this

dimension that received the highest scores were: "Reflective Journal writing allowed me describe what I understood" and "Reflective Journal writing helped me understand what I am learning". Most students also strongly agreed that reflective journal writing helped them understand what they are supposed to write in their reflective journals (3.93).

The dimension that came in the third place is *creativity and critical thinking skills* (3.94). Most students also strongly agreed that reflective journal writing supported their creativity and thinking skills (3.94). Statements for this dimension that received the highest scores were: "Reflective journal writing increased my creativity (4.01)" and "Reflective Journal writing was a way of thinking to explore my learning (4.03)".

This is followed by the fourth dimension of authentic learning which is facilitation of the learning experience (m=3.90). It is worth mentioning that this dimension has one of the statements that scored the highest writing in the questionnaire "I learnt a lot from writing reflective journals (4.67)". Other statements for this dimension that received the highest scores were: "Reflective Journal writing offered me a chance to develop and reinforce my writing skills" and "Reflective Journal writing actually improved my writing skills".

Finally, the fifth dimension of authentic learning is *valuing personal observation and knowledge* (3.87). Though this dimension received the lowest rating, it included some statements that received high ratings. For example, most students strongly agreed that "Reflective Journal writing was not a waste of time" as noticed in statement 19. Other statements for this dimension that received very high scores were: Overall, this was a worthwhile experience, "Reflective Journal writing should be encouraged/continued", and "Reflective journal writing was useful for my study"

It is worth mentioning that there were some items that got low to moderate rating. For example, some respondents did not welcome the idea of sharing with the class what they wrote in their journals (statement 22=3.55). Additionally, the respondents seemed to report that the

reflective journal writing process is not easy (statement 15=3.37) and that they need more time (statement 20=3.12).

Pre-service teachers' descriptions of learning experiences through reflective journal writing

In response to an open question in the questionnaire, students mentioned 25 different adjectives to describe their experiences in reflective journal writing. The most mentioned adjectives for the experience of the reflective journal writing were "important" (47), "useful" (47), "enjoyable" (40), "challenging" (35) "interesting" (32), "amazing" (29), "effective" (28), "creative" (26), "Nice" (25), "motivating" (20), "helpful" (20), "inspiring"(19) and "constructive" (17).

Additionally, the students were asked to express the challenges (concerns and issues) that they encountered in their reflective journal writing. The participants disclosed a number of challenges: lack of time (48); use of appropriate language and writing style (37); difficulty of the task (23); feeling uncomfortable expressing thoughts and discussing or sharing ideas (22); not being able to think of ideas (15); not liking to share ideas with others (5); not liking to reveal personality to others (5).

Additionally, the analyses of the reflections on the process of writing revealed how students perceived that the process of reflective journal writing facilitated the learning experience with regard to improving language skills, creativity, critical thinking skills, communication skills, active involvement, and building self-confidence and motivation. For each of these categories, the results are reported below.

Improving language skills

In fact, 70 students out of the 76 expressed that the experience helped them improve their writing skills (grammar, vocabulary). In addition to what is mentioned by RJ 1 and RJ 2, RJ3 stated:

"Writing several journals throughout the semester made steady progress in my writing skills. I noticed the difference between the first and the last journal in how I used parallelism, consistency and conciseness in my statements, which improved my academic writing".

RJ4 elaborated by writing

"I was able to pick a topic and give my honest opinion about it. We enhanced our writing. I think that by giving one's opinion, he or she starts thinking critically. At least that is what has happened to me. Two weeks after we started, my writing skills have improved dramatically. Having my skills developed helps me a lot with the other courses I take, such as The Grammar course."

Enhancing communication skills

Around 39 students mentioned that the experience enhanced their communications skills. RJ5 stated that the experience maximized her participation and increased her communication skills. RJ6 explained: "Now, I can communicate much easier with other English speakers because my ideas are more organized than before . . ." RJ7 added: "I can say about my experience that it helped me to increase my creativity, communication skills, and critical thinking skills. "

Enhancing creativity and critical thinking skills

Further, 42 students expressed that the experience contributed to either expanding their critical thinking skills or creativity and imagination. RJ8 stated that the experience helped her to think critically. RJ9 stated that the experience enhanced her creativity and imagination. She wrote: "I was able to convey my ideas more clearly. Also, I began using an article before a singular noun. Besides that, I became creative that I let my imagination wander to the farthest part in my mind."

Active involvement and building self-confidence

A lot of students mentioned that the experience helped in building their self- confidence. RJ10 noted journal writing enhanced her self-confidence and engaged her with the teacher and other students. RJ 11 explained that writing reflective journal helped her to build self-confidence. She clarified: "The more I wrote journals, the more I got feedback from my instructor and this helped me to gain trust in my instructor as he helped me identify my areas of weaknesses and suggest solutions."

Motivation

Eighteen students indicated that the process enhanced their motivation. Thirteen students reported that writing journals aided them in expressing their feelings and emotions. Finally, eight participants stated that the experience helped them to be autonomous and self-directed learners. RJ12 mentioned that one value that she gained from journal writing is self-discovery: "I learnt to trust my voice and express my thoughts and feelings the things that increased my self-confidence inside the classroom and in real life settings." RJ13 wrote in her journal entry that the process encouraged her express her feelings and thoughts on paper.

Discussion

This study aimed to find out ways in which reflective journal writing supports EFL students in authentic language learning. From the results of the questionnaires, it can be concluded that reflective journal writing facilitates the process of undergoing a positive authentic learning experience with regard to the five dimensions of authentic learning.

The results obtained from the questionnaire reveal that most of the statements showed high ratings with items number 16 (*I learnt a lot from writing reflective journals*) and 19 (*Reflective Journal writing was not a waste of time*) getting the highest rating respectively (m=4.67, m=4.43). This means that students believe that they benefited a lot from the journal writing process and they did not consider the process of writing reflective journals as a waste of time. Similarly, items 1 (*Reflective Journal writing helped me talk about my experiences*) and 23 (*Overall, this was a worthwhile experience*) lent support for these perceptions as most of the respondents reported that reflective journals helped them talk about their experiences and thus considered reflective journal writing as a worthwhile experience (m=4.17). Other items like 2 (*Reflective Journal writing helped me express my ideas & opinions Reflective*), 10 (*Journal writing allowed me describe what I understood*), and 21 (*Reflective Journal writing should be encouraged/continued*) revealed that reflective journal writing allowed the participants to describe what they understood

and express their ideas and opinions and therefore they considered it very important for such a process to be continued and encouraged. Most of the other items showed moderate to high rating where the participants considered reflective journal writing as a way of thinking to explore their learning, improved their writing, and helped them identify what they did well and what they need to learn more. Accordingly, the participants considered reflective journal writing as a useful tool for their study that contributed to increasing their creativity and shaping a better understanding of their learning thus providing them with opportunities to gain self-knowledge (item 4=3.95).

Another important finding from the questionnaire is that this experience had a positive impact on their writing, self-confidence, authorship, creativity and critical thinking skills. This is in agreement with several studies which reported that students believe that journal writing contribute to improving learning (Kose, 2005; Lew & Schmidt, 2007; Steven and Cooper, 2009, Moore, et al., 2010; O'Connell & Dymont, 2003; Williams, 2008; Park, 2003). Furthermore, the findings of the study revealed that the experience of journal writing gave the learners the opportunity to interact and communicate with others through sharing opinions and ideas, seeking others' help, or conveying meaning on paper with the self. This finding is in the same line with Williams' (2008) and Hiemstra's (2001) studies.

The results obtained from the analysis of the reflective journals supported this finding. The results showed clearly that the participants viewed the reflective journal writing process positively. These findings are in line with studies which demonstrated the beneficial impact of using reflective writing journals (Cooper, 2009; Graham, 2003; Greiman & Convington, 2007; Hemmati & Soltanpour, 2012; Moore et al., 2010; O'Connell and Dymont, 2003; Park, 2003; Sen, 2010; Stevens & Cooper, 2009; Watson, 2010).

Finally, one of the findings of this study is that reflective journal writing is challenging and time consuming. This is in agreement with several studies (Ahmed, 2019; Donyaie & Afshar, 2019; Park, 2003; Thorpe, 3004; Sen, 2010) which reported that reflective journal writings

can be challenging, demanding and time-consuming. Therefore, they need commitment.

On the other hand, the analysis of the qualitative data supported the findings obtained from the questionnaire. Facilitating the learning process, improving language skills, and promoting creativity and critical thinking skills, and increasing motivation were of most important issues revealed by the analysis of the journals. Definitely, improving their language skills is what matters to them. Their journals note dominantly with expressions of improving language skills and critical thinking, promoting critical thinking and developing their creativity. This is in agreement with several studies (Stevens & Cooper, 2009; Moore, et al., 2010; O'Connell & Dymont, 2003).

Additionally, the analysis of the journals revealed that reflective journal writing built their self-confidence and growth, enhanced students' understanding of their experiences and improved their communication skills and participation. This is in line with other studies (Graham, 2003; Park, 2003).

Finally, the experience of reflective journal writing revealed that the instructors can grasp some important issues which might otherwise be neglected as it contributed to the learners' personal development and self-expression and built a trust relationship between them and their audience. This is in agreement with Yoshihara (2008) who suggested that journal writing developed good and meaningful relationship between teachers and their students.

Conclusions and recommendations

The results obtained from the questionnaire revealed that students particularly valued active involvement and personal ownership as supportive to their language learning. Furthermore, they perceived journal writing supportive for understanding their own learning. Reflective journal writing allowed the participants to describe what they understood and express their ideas and opinions and therefore they considered it very important for such a process to be continued and encouraged. Additionally, the participants considered reflective journal

writing as a useful tool for their study that contributed to increasing their creativity and shaping a better understanding for their learning thus providing them with opportunities to gain self-knowledge.

These results were supported by the findings of students' reflections on the process of journal writing. In these reflections, students described how journal writing contributed to facilitating the learning process, improving language skills, promoting creativity and critical thinking skills, and increasing motivation. Additionally, the analysis of the journals revealed that reflective journal writing built their self-confidence and growth, enhanced students' understanding of their experiences and improved their communication skills and participation.

Students, however, also mentioned that reflective journal writing is challenging and time consuming. This is in agreement with several studies (Park, 2003; Thorpe, 2004; Sen, 2010) which reported that reflective journals writings can be challenging, demanding and time-consuming. Therefore, teachers need to create commitment, which can be obtained by building a relation of trust with attention for learners' personal development and self-expression (Yoshihara, 2008).

This study has some limitations. One of the limitations is that students might have been inclined to give sociable answers in the questionnaires and also might have described their experiences in the reflections more positively since they knew their teachers would read this. Furthermore, it should be taken into account that this study examined only one relatively short course at the university (8 weeks). Finally, all data rely on written accounts. In future research, interviews could add more insights to students' perceptions with regard to the process of writing reflective journals.

The results of the quantitative and the qualitative data indicate that the experience of reflective journal writing was a successful one as the students became active learners, good communicators, better confident and highly motivated. As a result, they valued the experience and described it as a valuable experience that should be enhanced. Due to its

benefits, it would be recommended to include reflective journal writing as an essential component of writing courses at universities.

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Appendix (1)

The purpose of this questionnaire is to measure the students’ attitudes towards Journal writing. Please read the statements carefully and answer PART I, PART II and PART III

Your answers will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous.

PART I: Please, tick (✓) the appropriate box.

A-Gender: <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Male
B-Year of study: <input type="checkbox"/> Second <input type="checkbox"/> Third
C-Current GPA: <input type="checkbox"/> Below 60 <input type="checkbox"/> 60 – 69 <input type="checkbox"/> 70 – 79 <input type="checkbox"/> 80-89 <input type="checkbox"/> 90 and above
D- When do you start writing a Journal Entry? 1- Several days before it is due 2- About a day before it is due 3- At the last possible minute
E- I practise writing in English. a- Every day b- Twice a week c- Once a week d- Twice a month e- Once a month

PART II: *Indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding your views about Journal writing by putting a tick (✓) in the appropriate box using the scale given below*

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree
 1 2 3 4 5

	ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT AND PERSONAL OWNERSHIP OF LEARNING	1	2	3	4	5
1	Reflective Journal writing helped me talk about my experiences.					
2	Reflective Journal writing helped me express my ideas & opinions.					
3	Reflective Journal writing helped me respond to my thoughts and feelings.					
4	Reflective Journal writing was an opportunity to gain self-knowledge.					

	ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT AND PERSONAL OWNERSHIP OF LEARNING	1	2	3	4	5
5	Reflective journal writing helped identify what I do well and what I need to learn more.					
	CREATIVITY AND CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS					
6	Reflective journal writing increased my creativity.					
7	Reflective Journal writing stimulated my critical thinking skills.					
8	Reflective Journal writing was a way of thinking to explore my learning.					
	UNDERSTANDING OF OUR OWN LEARNING					
9	Reflective Journal writing helped me understand what I am learning.					
10	Reflective Journal writing allowed me describe what I understood.					
11	I understood what I am supposed to write in my reflective journal.					
	FACILITATION OF THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE					
12	Reflective Journal writing enhanced my communication skills.					
13	Reflective Journal writing offered me a chance to develop and reinforce my writing skills.					
14	Reflective Journal writing ACTUALLY improved my writing skills.					
15	I found it easy to write in my reflective journals.					
16	I learnt a lot from writing reflective journals.					
	VALUING PERSONAL OBSERVATION AND KNOWLEDGE					
17	Journal writing motivated me to write more.					
18	Reflective journal writing was useful for my study.					
19	Reflective Journal writing was not a waste of time.					
20	I had enough time to write in my journals.					
21	Reflective Journal writing should be encouraged/continued.					
22	I would like to share with the class what I wrote in my journal.					
23	Overall, this was a worthwhile experience.					

PART III: A. Write six adjectives to express your experience about the reflective journal writing.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

2. Do you have any concerns (issues) about the reflective journal writing experience?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Thank you

Appendix (2)

Descriptive statistics: means and standard deviation for the whole items in the questionnaire (means are arranged in an ascending order)

No.	Item	N	M	Std. D.
16	I learnt a lot from writing reflective journals.	76	4.67	.575
19	Reflective Journal writing was not a waste of time.	76	4.43	.718
1	Reflective Journal writing helped me talk about my experiences.	76	4.17	.719
23	Overall, this was a worthwhile experience.	76	4.17	.88526
10	Reflective Journal writing allowed me to describe what I understood.	76	4.07	.754
21	Reflective Journal writing should be encouraged/continued.	76	4.07	.736
2	Reflective Journal writing helped me express my ideas & opinions.	76	4.07	.754
8	Reflective Journal writing was a way of thinking to explore my learning.	76	4.03	.765
14	Reflective Journal writing ACTUALLY improved my writing skills.	76	4.01	.643
5	Reflective journal writing helped identify what I do well and what I need to learn more.	76	4.01	.757
6	Reflective journal writing increased my creativity.	76	4.01	.673
18	Reflective journal writing was useful for my study.	76	4.00	.683
9	Reflective Journal writing helped me understand what I am learning.	76	3.97	.748
4	Reflective Journal writing was an opportunity to gain self-knowledge.	76	3.95	.728
11	I understood what I am supposed to write in my reflective journal.	76	3.93	.718
3	Reflective Journal writing helped me respond to my thoughts and feelings.	76	3.87	.754
13	Reflective Journal writing offered me a chance to develop and reinforce my writing skills.	76	3.87	.640
7	Reflective Journal writing stimulated my critical thinking skills.	76	3.85	.630
17	Journal writing motivated me to write more	76	3.61	.689
12	Reflective Journal writing enhanced my communication skills.	76	3.59	.786

No.	Item	N	M	Std. D.
22	I would like to share with the class what I wrote in my journal.	76	3.55	.929
15	I found it easy to write in my reflective journals.	76	3.37	.780
20	I had enough time to write in my journals.	76	3.12	1.119

Appendix (3)

Adjectives that express experience about the reflective journal writing.

	Adjective	Number
1	important	47
2	useful	47
3	enjoyable	40
4	challenging	35
5	interesting	32
6	amazing	29
7	effective	28
8	creative	26
9	nice	25
10	motivating	20
11	helpful	20
12	inspiring	19
13	constructive	17
14	fruitful	15
15	easy	13
16	rich	10
17	flexible	8
18	great	8
19	stimulating	8
20	wonderful	4
21	fantastic	2
22	fruitful	2

	Adjective	Number
23	encouraging	2
24	engaging	2
25	practical	1
Total		460

Appendix (4)

Challenges (issues and concerns) about the reflective journal writing.

		N
1	Lack of enough time	48
2	difficulty	23
3	Expressing my feelings, thoughts and opinions	22
4	It is unusual to me and the first time to write journals in university.	17
5	Lack of Ideas	15
6	Choosing the topic	14
7	Expressing my ideas	14
8	Weak writing skills	14
9	Lack of vocabulary	10
10	worried about my grammar	9
11	I do not like revealing personality to others.	5
12	I don't like sharing ideas.	5
13	worried about my spelling	4
14	I get bored.	4
Total		204