USING REFLECTIVE WRITING TO ENHANCE STUDENT'S ENGLISH WRITING: STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *This study is aimed at exploring the effectiveness of reflective writing as a strategy to enhance students' writing performance and investigates the challenges students encounter during this process. A mix method research design was employed, utilizing questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students enrolled in an academic writing course. In addition, writing tests was conducted in order to examine students' writing improvement throughout the course. The findings reveal that reflective writing plays a significant role in improving students' overall writing ability, particularly in terms of idea organization and vocabulary use. Through reflective writing, students developed greater self-awareness of their writing strengths and weaknesses, which encouraged more effective revision strategies and critical thinking. However, the study also identifies key challenges such as limited vocabulary and difficulty expressing personal insights. Despite these obstacles, most participants acknowledged the value of reflective writing in fostering deeper learning and continuous improvement. The study concludes that reflective writing can serve as a powerful pedagogical tool for writing instruction, provided that students receive explicit guidance, structured reflection prompts, and sufficient opportunities for practice.*

Keywords: *Higher education; Challenges; Writing development; Reflective writing.*

1. Introduction

Reflective writing is a form of academic–personal writing in which learners revisit their own experiences, activities, or learning processes and then describe – analyze – evaluate their strengths, weaknesses, feelings, and the meaning of those experiences. Through this process, writers draw lessons and identify directions for future improvement.

Writing tends to be the toughest skill for English learners in Vietnam. Students struggle when trying to organize ideas or dealing with proper grammar and vocabulary. On top of that, many students are seriously nervous about writing and lack of confident in writing, particularly in academic writing.

Reflective writing came into play as a method to boost self-awareness and critical thinking skills. The idea has been around since Schön and Kolb discussed it back in 1983 and 1984, basically encouraging learners to analyze their own work for improvement. Although this approach has been studied worldwide, it has received little attention in Vietnam's EFL classrooms

This study zeroes in on how EFL students respond to reflective writing practices over time. It tracks their progress through multiple test phases while also unpacking their personal experiences and roadblocks along the way. It is hoped that the research not only clarifies how effective of reflective writing to students' writing but also mentions some challenges that students coped with in their writing process.

2. Research overview

Reflective writing is a form of academic–personal writing in which learners revisit their own experiences, activities, or learning processes and then describe – analyze – evaluate their weaknesses, feelings, and the meaning of those experiences. Through this process, writers draw lessons and identify directions for future improvement.

It is essential for work-integrated learning

initiatives to incorporate reflective writing, as it enables students to better understand and take ownership of their professional learning journey (Billett, 2009; Smith, 2012). The experiential and self-authored components of student learning are understudied since a large portion of the current research concentrates on results rather than the reflecting process itself (Jackson, 2014). Reflection constitutes a critical nexus between theoretical frameworks and practical application, characterized by an ongoing cognitive progression. As defined by Livingstone (2019), reflective thinking entails a rigorous interrogation of assumptions, existing knowledge, and various perspectives to provide a robust evidentiary basis for both retrospective and prospective conclusions. However, this interaction is frequently a messy, intricate, and diverse daily experience that requires a secure setting for introspection (Dewey, 1933). Reflective cognition is a "sole method of escape from the purely impulsive or purely routine action," according to Dewey (1933). Bolton (2010) notes that reflective writing provides a "protected space" for writers to engage with their own inner voice and personal narratives, rather than merely responding to external academic requirements. Moon (2004) suggests that reflective writing is a tool for "deep learning," where the writer moves beyond simply answering a prompt to exploring personal experiences and internal emotional spaces. Reflective writing is widely employed within academic pedagogy as a means of encouraging students to engage in deeper comprehension beyond the superficial text. The process of reflection is intrinsically linked to the cultivation of critical thinking, as it prompts students to transcend instinctive reactions and refine their evaluative frameworks prior to taking action. By systematically weighing theoretical constructs, empirical realities, and lived experiences, individuals can enhance their capacity for discernment and responsiveness when navigating complex decision-making processes (Jung, 2011). Reflective writing is a widely adopted pedagogical tool across critical domains such as education, composition, and healthcare. This practice requires individuals to document their experiences for the purpose of

critical review and subsequent refinement of professional methods. To refine critical faculties, reflective writing must be practiced systematically. This continuous cycle of evaluation and reflection allows for a more profound exploration of topics, ultimately improving the scholarly quality of the output (Lyons, 2010).

Reflective writing is categorized as a high-order cognitive skill, integrating cognitive, affective, social, and metacognitive dimensions (Williams, Woolliams, & Spiro, 2012). Cognitively, this practice facilitates deeper learning, which concurrently bolsters a learner's self-efficacy and intellectual capacity. Metacognitively, it demands the systematic organization and synthesis of disparate ideas into a coherent, structured knowledge base. Furthermore, the affective dimension is engaged as students articulate emotional experiences and integrate personal values with academic knowledge (Prosser & Webb, 1994). Consequently, cultivating proficient reflective writing skills is vital within secondary education, as it directly correlates with enhanced academic performance. It also allows students to express pent-up emotions and find cathartic relief. Reflective writing serves as a bridge for collaboration, helping students understand the nuances of how they convey ideas to peers. It acts as a critical stage within the experiential learning cycle, where students move systematically through planning and acting to observation and deeper reflection (Kolb, 1984).

Despite all that, scratching down thoughts is still a primo way for students to get wicked smart about their own thinking, keep tabs on what they're learning, and get their heads around stuff better. Plus, it's cool for teaming up and cranking up the know-how on how they learn. So, that's why tossing reflections on paper still bags a key spot in schooling, pushing folks to level up and dig deeper, as Allan pointed out in 2014 (Allan, 2014). Educational programs, particularly those with a specialized focus, greatly benefit from the integration of reflective writing. This practice encourages learners to engage in introspection and derive meaningful insights from their experiences, thereby fostering independent

thinking and a deeper conceptual understanding. In professional fields such as urban planning and architecture, reflection functions not only as a means of personal and intellectual growth but also as a critical component of effective professional practice. The guidelines of the Royal Town Planning Institute's Assessment of Professional Competence (RTPI APC) exemplify this integration. As Moon (2004) emphasizes, effective reflective practice requires more than a simple retelling of events; students must move past descriptive accounts to engage in deeper analytical and evaluative processing of their experience. Such reflection enables consideration of broader perspectives, such as sustainability and the enhancement of environmentally conscious living—issues highlighted by Peel (2009). When students adopt a holistic approach to reflection, they develop stronger critical thinking skills that are vital for professional competence and lifelong learning. Consequently, higher education institutions should embed reflective practices throughout their curricula to ensure that graduates are equipped to meet both reflective and analytical demands in their professional contexts. One of the most notable challenges with using reflection as a writing pedagogical tool is the ability to assess a student's capacity to reflect reliably. Each student must provide multiple reflective samples, which is highly impractical for objective evaluation. Assessing reflective practice presents significant psychometric hurdles, particularly regarding inter-rater reliability. Koole et al. (2011) argue that the subjective nature of personal reflection complicates the consensus-building process among evaluators. Furthermore, they suggest that highly standardized rubrics may fail to adequately measure the nuanced quality and depth of a learner's internal reflections. The variability in students' ability to express their thoughts when writing, and the readiness with which they disclose information about themselves add more complexity to the assessment. Reflective writing can be very useful, however, teachers' instruction and guidance of the students fundamentally impact the quality of implementation. The application of reflective writing in educational settings involves navigating the tension between its benefits and the difficulty of its measurement. Kembe et al. (2008) note that the private, cognitive nature of reflection makes it difficult for educators to objectively judge the strength of a student's thought process. However, this inherent fluidity allows for more adaptable assessment methods. Conventional evaluation relies on analyzing the resulting text and monitoring student engagement during the task (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). More contemporary approaches attempt to measure reflective depth by mapping it against hierarchical cognitive frameworks (Ono & Ichii, 2019).

3. Research methods

The study involved 23 final-year English majors in the Institute of Business and Science of TDU. As final-year English major students, they were likely encountering common academic challenges. A structured questionnaire was developed to assess the students' perception about reflective writing. The questionnaire was distributed to the students in an online format and took approximately 3-5 minutes to complete. The questionnaire responses was analyzed using descriptive statistics (such as frequencies and percentages) to identify the most common difficulties students face in writing process and explore students' opinions about effects of reflective writing. In addition to that, a data analysis process was conducted in order to find out how reflective writing improve their study in English writing. Furthermore, a semi-structure interviewed was performed to further clarify students' perspectives and the difficulties they encountered during the reflective writing process.

There are two research questions:

1. To what extend does reflective writing enhance students' writing?

2. What challenges do students face in reflective writing process

4. Research results

4.1. Answering for the first research question

The results collected from the *Attendance and Academic Performance Tracking Sheet* for the course *Advanced Writing Skills (D112K14)* in the third semester, 2024, demonstrate a clear improvement in students' writing performance

over the duration of the course. Twenty-three students participated in two major assessments which are Test 1 (administered in the early stage of the semester) and Test 2 (at the end of the course). Both tests were evaluated under the same criteria, focusing on idea development, organization, argumentation, vocabulary, and grammatical accuracy.

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare students' scores before and after the intervention. There was a significant increase in scores from the pre-test (M = 6.26, SD = 0.44) to the post-test (M = 7.74, SD = 0.54), $t(22)$ = -8.40, $p < .001$, Cohen's d = 3.02. These results suggest that the instructional intervention had a strong positive effect on students' academic performance.

Table 1. Results of the Paired Samples t-Test comparing Test 1 and Test 2 scores

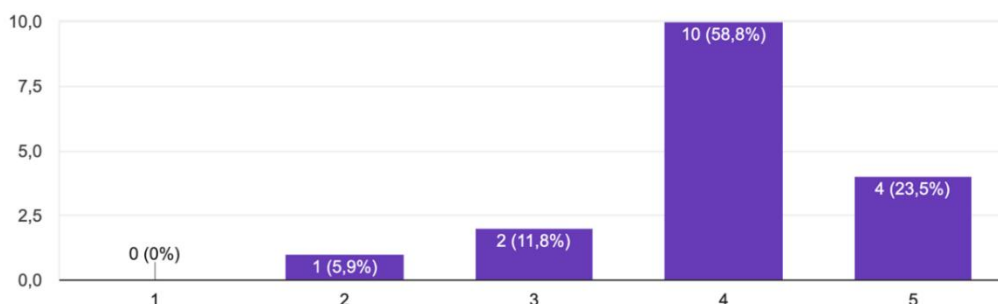| Statistics	Variable 1	Variable 2
Mean	6.26	7.74
Variance	0.19	0.29
Observations	23	23
Pearson Correlation	0.87	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	22	
t Stat	-8.40	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.0000002	
t Critical two-tail	2.074	

Figure 1. presents a bar chart illustrating students' self-reported perceptions of their reflective writing strength, measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree). Most notably, 82,3% students (14 out of 17) responses that reflective writing helped them notice their writing strengths. 11,8% (2 out of 17) selected category 3 that suggests a moderate level of perceived competence. There is only 5,9% (1 out of 17) selected 2 and no participants chose 1, indicating an absence of perceived severe weakness.

Figure 1. Students' opinions about reflective writing strength

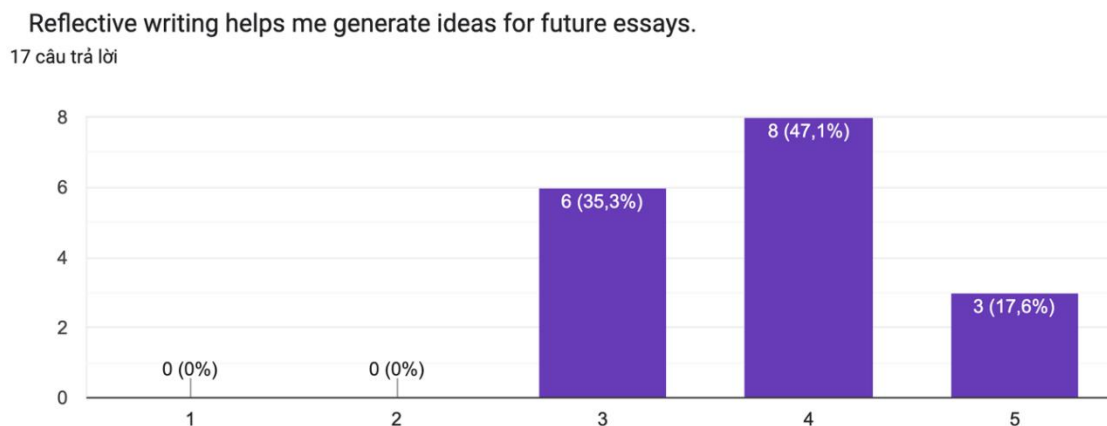Reflective writing helps me notice my writing strengths.
17 câu trả lời

The bar chart 2. shows the results of reflective writing in generating ideas for future essays. It can be seen clearly that 94,1% students (16 out of 17) had positive opinions about reflective writing.

There were zero responses in 1 or 2 categories, indicating that none of students felt that reflective writing was unhelpful for generating future essay ideas.
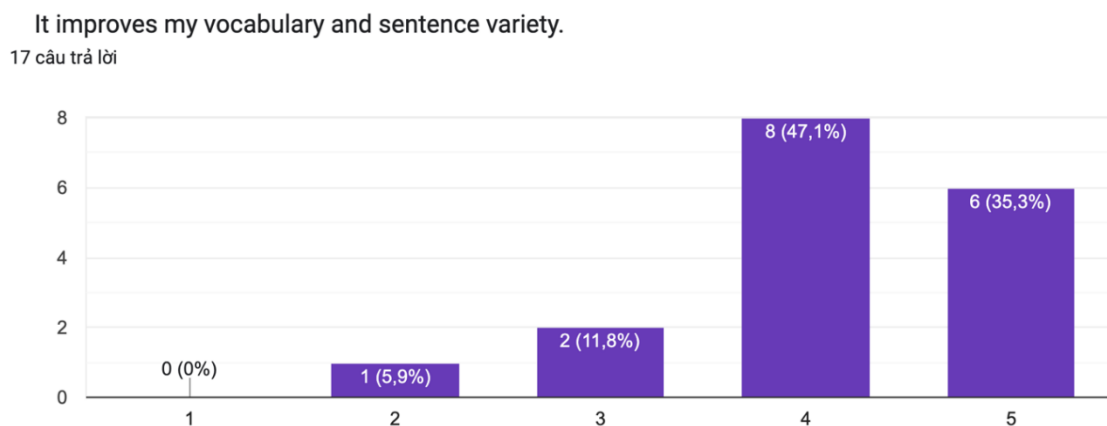
Figure 2. Students' opinions about reflective writing regarding ideas for essays

Reflective writing helps me generate ideas for future essays.
17 câu trả lời

The chat 3. illustrates the results of a survey regarding the impact of reflective writing on students' vocabulary and sentence variety. Overall, the data shows a very strong positive consequence, with the overwhelming majority of respondents agreeing that this writing method improve their language skills. Specifically, 82,4% respondents, account for 14 students chose options 4 and 5. There was only 1 student disagreed with this statement by choosing option 2. Notably, none of students selected the strongest disagreement.
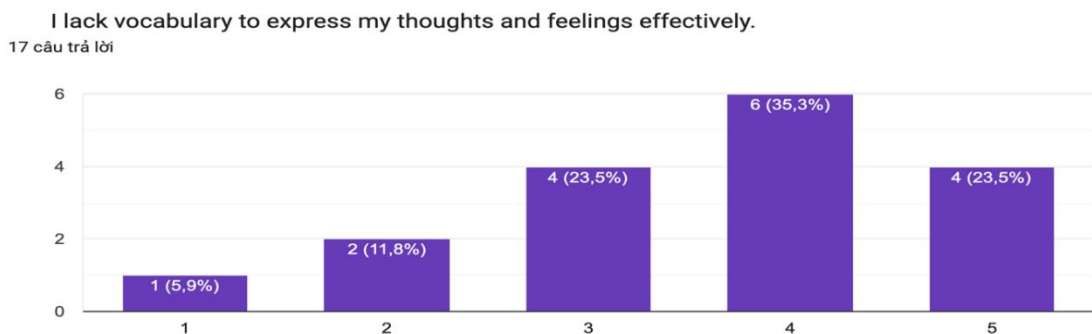
4.2. Answering for the second research question

Figure 3. Students' opinions about reflective writing regarding vocabulary and sentence variety.

It improves my vocabulary and sentence variety.
17 câu trả lời

Interviews with the students revealed several recurring themes that illustrate both the potential and the challenges of reflective writing in an EFL context. Many students emphasized that reflective writing helped them become more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. This heightened self-awareness allowed them to recognize recurring mistakes, monitor their progress, and take more responsibility for their learning.

At the same time, students did not hesitate to share the difficulties they've encountered. According to figure 1.4, 58,8% respondents (10 out of 17) chose options 4,5. This suggests that nearly three-fifths of the class believed they lack of the vocabulary needed for effective expression. 4 respondents chose the neutral option. There were 3 students disagreed, indicating they did not feel a significant vocabulary lack.

Figure 4. Students' opinions about challenges in reflective writing

I lack vocabulary to express my thoughts and feelings effectively.
17 câu trả lời

The following quotes illustrate these perspectives:

- *"Reflective writing helps me recognize my mistakes and improve vocabulary."* (Student A)

- *"It makes my arguments more coherent and logical."* (Student B)

- *"Sometimes it doesn't make my writing more creative."* (Student C)

- *"At first I felt reflective writing was extra work, but later I saw it helped me write more clearly."* (Student D)

- *"I can see the same mistakes appear in my writing, but reflective writing doesn't really motivate me to fix them."* (Student E)

The survey results backed up the themes we found in the interviews, which really helped to confirm the validity of our findings through triangulation. A significant number of participants shared that reflective writing positively influenced their writing skills.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study show that reflective writing can play an important role in helping EFL students grow as writers, but they also remind us that reflection is not a magic solution. From a constructivist perspective, the results suggest that students were not only absorbing knowledge but also actively building it through looking back at their own writing and experiences. Several students talked about recognizing repeated mistakes or noticing how their organization improved over time. The recognition is exactly what constructivist learning theory describes as scaffolding as students gradually building their new skills on top of what they have already known, often with proper supports from teachers or peers.

The steady improvement in organization and vocabulary also reflects what Writing Process Theory has long emphasized: writing is not a short-term progress, but a process of drafting, revising, and rethinking.

At the same time, the interviews revealed something equally important: students began to see writing not just as a classroom exercise, but as a way of expressing themselves. This links very close to the idea of Writing as Social Practice, where writing is understood as being connected to identity and community. When students described how reflection helped them to "recognize themselves" in their writing or gave them more confidence to articulate their thoughts, they were moving beyond language mechanics. They were positioning themselves as participants in academic and social conversations, which is a powerful shift for language learners.

However, the study also makes clear that reflective writing has lots of challenges. The most consistent limitation was around creativity. Only a small number of students felt that reflection made their writing more imaginative, and several noted that they struggled when they lacked examples or clearer guidance. This raises an important concern: without proper supports, reflective tasks risk becoming repetitive or mechanical, something students complete because they "have to" rather than doing it actively to improve their writing. Prior research echoes this point such as Taczak (2015) and Allan (2014) both emphasize that scaffolding is essential for reflection to be meaningful. Our findings suggest the same. Models like Gibbs' Reflective Cycle or activities such as peer reflection sessions might give students clearer

entry points into the reflective process and encourage more authentic engagement.

Overall, the results remind us of two things. Firstly, reflective writing clearly has its own value: it helped students organizing their thoughts, expanding their vocabulary, and approaching writing with less anxiety.

Secondly, reflection needs to be carefully designed and supported. If we expect students to reflect meaningfully and creatively, then we must also give them the tools, examples, and opportunities to do so. In this way, reflective writing is both a personal and a social practice: it happens in the quiet space of the learner's own thinking, but it also depends on the structures and communities we build around them.

6. Conclusion & implications

In conclusion, this study shows that reflective writing can make a huge difference in how EFL students approach and experience writing. Throughout the survey and interview data, students reported that reflection helped them to develop their ideas better, organizing their essays more effectively, and also helps them expanding their vocabulary. Despite these advantages, the study also revealed significant challenges that students face when engaging in reflective writing. These include limited vocabulary resources and difficulty articulating personal insights in critically evaluating their own writing. Such challenges suggest that reflective writing, while valuable, requires scaffolding and guided support to maximize its positive impact.

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed for educators and learners. Teachers should clearly explain the purpose and process of reflection, using examples to illustrate strong reflective responses. Vocabulary lists, sentence starters, and reflection phrases can assist students who struggle to articulate their thoughts. Besides, students should mornitor their own process by reviewing previous reflections and drafts to identify patterns in their writing strengths and weaknesses. Meanwhile, they should practice reflective writing regularly to both become familiar and more confident in writing.

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SỬ DỤNG PHƯƠNG PHÁP VIẾT PHẢN ÁNH ĐỂ NÂNG CAO KHẢ NĂNG VIẾT TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN: GÓC NHÌN TỪ SINH VIÊN

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Tóm tắt: *Nghiên cứu khảo sát hiệu quả của phương pháp viết phản ánh như một chiến lược nhằm nâng cao năng lực viết tiếng Anh của sinh viên, đồng thời tìm hiểu những khó khăn mà sinh viên gặp phải trong quá trình học tập. Nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp hỗn hợp định tính và định lượng, sử dụng kết hợp các công cụ nghiên cứu như bảng hỏi và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc. Bên cạnh đó, điểm các bài kiểm tra viết cũng được sử dụng nhằm đánh giá rõ hơn sự cải thiện kỹ năng viết của sinh viên. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy, phương pháp viết phản ánh có vai trò quan trọng trong việc cải thiện kỹ năng viết tiếng Anh của sinh viên, đặc biệt ở các khía cạnh như ý tưởng viết, và vốn từ vựng. Thông qua việc thực hành, sinh viên phát triển nhận thức sâu sắc hơn về điểm mạnh và điểm yếu của mình khi viết bài luận bằng tiếng Anh. Đồng thời, nghiên cứu cũng chỉ ra một số khó khăn trong quá trình thực hành phương pháp viết phản ánh như: thiếu từ vựng hay khó khăn trong việc diễn đạt suy nghĩ cá nhân. Tuy nhiên, đa số sinh viên đều công nhận giá trị của phương pháp này trong việc thúc đẩy học tập sâu và tiến bộ hơn. Viết phản ánh là một phương pháp hiệu quả trong học viết học thuật khi sinh viên được hướng dẫn rõ ràng, cung cấp đề mục có cấu trúc, và có cơ hội luyện tập đầy đủ.*

Từ khóa: *Giáo dục đại học; Khó khăn; Phát triển kỹ năng viết; Viết phản ánh.*