# DEVELOPING LIBYAN UNDERGRADUATES' WRITING SKILLS THROUGH REFLECTIVE JOURNALING: A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

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## Abstract

Poor EFL writing skills among Libyan undergraduates have been a great concern for stakeholders. Teachers and instructors need to adopt new strategies that would help the students to improve their writing skills. Therefore, this study critically examines the impact of reflective journal writing strategy in developing students writing skills by reviewing relevant literature. This is done with a view to providing Libyan teachers with another strategy for enhancing the students' EFL writing skills. The paper reveals the significance of reflective journal writing to not only students' writing skills but the entire learning process. It also highlights the steps of implementing reflective journal writing. Finally, the paper makes some recommendations on how teachers can successfully implement reflective journal writing in their classrooms.

**Keywords:** Libya; reflective journal writing; teaching writing; undergraduates

## INTRODUCTION (11 PT)

Writing is believed to be an important language skill that plays a fundamental role in communication, especially in an educational setting (Mourtaga, 2004). In most educational institutions around the world, students are evaluated mainly through writing. They are expected to communicate and share their ideas in examinations, reports, term papers, etc through writing. However, writing is considered by many scholars and even learners to be the most difficult language skill to be acquired particularly in a second or foreign language (Nunan, 1996). For instance, writing in English has been a very difficult task for many students learning English as a second language (ESL) or as a foreign language (EFL). There is no doubt that English has become a language of scholarship around the globe and thus, students must be proficient in writing in English. Many studies have been carried out and many others are still in the process of investigating the teaching and learning of writing in English either as a second language or a foreign language in order to enhance the process. This has become necessary because English has become a global language and a language for further education and professional development all over the world. In second and foreign language learning, writing also plays a significant role in enhancing the process (Chastain,1988).

In the Libyan context, English is used as a foreign language and studies have shown that teaching English as a foreign language in the country witnessed prosperity in the 1960s and 1970s. However, it suffered stagnation in the 1980s and 1990s as the result of the cancellation of English from school curriculums by Gaddafi's regime mainly due to political reasons (Mohamed, 2014). This has been the root cause of all the current challenges facing the teaching and learning of English in the country. Many studies have revealed that many Libyan undergraduates face various challenges with their writing in English and found academic writing the most challenging (Alsied & Ibrahim, 2017). Various factors have been identified as responsible for the students' poor writing skills. However, the most prominent is the lack of qualified teachers (Mohsen, 2014) and adequate teaching approaches that can help to improve the students' proficiency in English. They mostly over-rely on traditional methods that emphasize extensive linguistic input rather than communicative output (Diaab, 2016). For instance, Grammar Translation Method (GTM) is the most popular used approach by teachers in teaching English in Libya which only encourages memorization of English words and their meaning in Arabic (Elabbar, 2011). To improve the teaching and learning of writing in English in Libya, there is a need to equip the teachers with new learning approaches that are proven

effective in enhancing students' writing skills. Therefore, this study suggests that reflective journal writing should be employed by Libyan teachers as a strategy to develop students' EFL writing skills.

The term reflective journal writing is a learning strategy whereby teachers ask students to record their experiences and perceptions of a particular class or class activity. It is derived from the word reflection which according to Boud, Keogh and Walker (2005) is a part of humans' daily activities. According to them, people need to have some time to reflect on their activities to make sense of what has happened or to share other people's ideas or experiences. Another term for reflective journal writing is journal keeping (Peñaflorida, 2002). For many decades, reflective journal writing has been used as a teaching strategy in many countries and found to be a useful strategy (Amirkhanovaa, Ageevab, and Fakhretdinov, 2016). It is discovered by researchers that reflective journal writing encourages students to develop their critical thinking skills and intellectual abilities through communicating their ideas and messages, students also develop their self-reflection, and macro-and micro-linguistic improvements (Sudirman, Gemilang & Kristanto 2021b). It also offers students a good opportunity for extensive reading practices. It is enjoyable to many students because it gives them the freedom to write on a topic of their choice at their convenient time and It also gives them privacy, freedom, and safety to experiment and develop ideas as a writer (Peñaflorida, 2002).

In recent times, reflective journal writing has been widely used in language classrooms, especially ESL/EFL classrooms, because it is proven to be a useful strategy in supporting the teaching and learning processes. Specifically, it enhances writing skills, and the learning assessment and, therefore, allows the learners to make judgments about their learning progress (May-Melendez, Balderas-Garza, Alcocer-Vazquez, Quijano-Zavala, 2019). Despite the widely use of reflective journal writing in ESL/EFL classrooms in various countries like Indonesia (Siahaan, Ping, Aridah, & Asih, 2021), Iran (Kouhpeyma & Kashefian-Naeeini 2020), Mexico (May-Melendez, Balderas-Garza, Alcocer-Vazquez, & Quijano-Zavala, 2019), it has almost not been used in the Libyan EFL classrooms. Thus, this study examines the use of reflective journal writing in developing students' writing skills with a view to providing the Libyan teachers with new teaching and learning strategy.

## Teaching English in Libya

English is used as a foreign language in Libyan as such, it could be assumed that the teaching and learning of English face numerous challenges like any other EFL country. However, the case is unique in Libya. Studies have shown that teaching English as a foreign language in Libya went through various stages and challenges in its history from prosperity in the 1960s and 1970s to stagnation in the 1980s and 1990s (Mohamed, 2014). The stagnation was the result of the cancellation of English from school curriculums due to political reasons by Gaddafi's regime. This stagnation lasted for almost a decade. In the late 1990s, there was a revival of the teaching in Libyan schools due to the restoration of political relations with the West following the resolution of the Lockerbie case. Since then, English teaching has been gaining momentum as an academic profession and as a business despite the hard conditions experienced by the country in the aftermath of the revolution, which led to the downfall of Gaddafi's regime.

After the restoration of the teaching of English in the Libyan schools, other challenges sprang up mostly due to the long period of absence of teaching English in the country. Studies have shown that teaching English in Libya has been facing various challenges ranging from lack of qualified teachers, shortage of teaching aids for the language, language laboratories at schools, and absence of programmed language training for the teachers, (Mohsen, 2014). Diaab, (2016) reported that many Libyan English language teachers lack adequate teaching approaches that can help to improve the students' proficiency in English. They mostly over-rely on traditional methods that emphasize extensive linguistic input rather than communicative output. This has been supported by Elabbar (2011) who pointed out that the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) is the most popular and accepted approach to teaching English in Libya. This is simply because most the teachers believe that when students memorize a large amount of vocabulary and grammar rules, introducing various activities to practice the language use would be easy. As a result of the poor teaching and learning methods employed by the teachers, many students face challenges in learning the language. Alsied and Ibrahim (2017) revealed that Libyan undergraduates face various challenges with their writing in English especially academic writing the most challenging. It was also found that Libyan teachers had negative attitudes towards their students' research due to the following reasons: lack of motivation, insufficient background knowledge about research, lack of library resources, inadequate number of courses related to research, and unavailability of the Internet in the college. Therefore, there is a serious need to develop the EFL teaching and learning in Libya by introducing Libyan EFL teachers to the other theoretical and methodological developments which are proven effective in the discipline. (Mohamed, 2014), thus, the need for reflective journal writing.

## Definition of Reflective Journal Writing

The term reflective journal writing has been defined by numerous scholars. For instance, it is defined by Dyment and O'Connell (2003) as students' daily records or notes on the event, personal reflections, observations of a learning environment, and experiences responses. Merly and Edgargo (2016) defined it as a kind of learning in which students can capture their learning experiences through writing a journal. It is also defined as a writing in a form of a diary which learners used to record their thoughts, experiences, and ideas regularly (Amirkhanovaa, Ageevab, and Fakhretdinov, 2016). Reflective journal writing is described as discovery writing because students can explore many ideas by using different topics from their classroom experiences and relate the ideas to their environment. In the writing, they can explain what they understand in the class and ask for whatever they do not understand and also explain what they need to know in subsequent meetings. Through this, the students may develop flexibility and engagement perspectives as learners that will increase their success in the writing classroom (Dyment & O'Connell, 2003).

According to Northern Illinois University, reflective journals are personal notes of students' learning experiences that they submit to teachers for feedback. The content of the journals is usually determined by prompts or questions given by teachers concerning the students' learning experiences which include the course, tasks, the learning process etc. Whether the journals are graded or not depends on the professor's criteria. However, some scholars have a view that reflective journals should not be necessarily submitted to teachers. They suggest that students should keep their writing if they like and the reflective journal should not be graded. This would allow students to write their real learning experiences to simply write what their teachers like. The main purpose of reflective journal writing is to establish the link between the present level of knowledge and the already obtained knowledge and to detect a personal connection with the material studied (Amirkhanovaa, Ageevab, and Fakhretdinov, 2016).

Reflective journal writing is effective in developing students learning skills and many other skills. For example, Sudirman, Gemilang, & Kristanto, (2021) in their systemic review discovered various benefits of reflective journal writing on students' writing skills. It develops writing performance, enhances self-discovery, self-inquiry, critical ideas, advancement of cognitive and metacognitive skills, creativity, self-organization, and professional practice development among others. It also encourages the development of the students' higher-order cognitive skills, such as monitoring, inference, and perspective-taking (Kim & Park, 2019), and students' reflective skills (So et al., 2018). It is also reported that reflective journal writing facilitates students' reflection on their personal opinions, activities, and learning experiences which enable them to develop new awareness and understanding in learning activities (Boud, 2001). Reflective writing of a journal helps students to connect their learning experiences (Fisher, 1996) and use background materials relevant to their individual learning experiences (Hashemi & Mirzaei, 2015). In the EFL setting, it is reported that reflective journal writing has many benefits for students: increases students' writing competence generally which includes the frequency and accuracy of using cohesive devices, generic meanings, cohesion, and textual environment (Alfalagg, 2020). In addition, reflective journal writing benefits students as it allows them to learn and master new English words through the use of a dictionary. For example, when students write words and definitions from a dictionary, the meaning is documented for them to remember them. this enables the students to write clear and accurate messages that could be understood simply (Rhodes & Brook, 2021).

Reflective journal writing has some pedagogical implications for both teachers and students in an ESL/EFL classroom. It develops the students' metacognition which is an essential requirement that allows the student to be aware of themselves concerning their learning needs, and plan, monitor and evaluate their learning process. For instance, reflective journal writing enables them to think and rethink the learning activities and to identify their strengths and weaknesses in every learning process (Sudirman, Gemilang & Kristanto 2021b). As for the teachers, when the students' metacognition is increased it would help teachers to design and delivers their course contents successfully. A reflective journal helps teachers to carry out a formative assessment which eventually helps the students to develop their critical thinking and other skills (Henter & Indreica, 2014).

Despite the benefits of reflective journal writing on students' writing and learning skills, it may be a daunting task for some students because it may require multiple extensive revisions based on the lecturer's comments or feedback (Roesler, 2020). Thus, learners, especially ESL and EFL, should be aware of evidence-based writing, and have some basic English language skills, editing skills, or peer feedback (Balderaset & Cuamatzi, 2018) as these would help to minimize multiple revisions and teachers' comments. Thus, implementing the reflective journal writing in the Libyan EFL context, could be better if second or third-year students are used because they have at least acquired the basic knowledge of English vocabulary, spelling, sentence formation and punctuation. Reflective journal writing task may be a very difficult task for first-year students because some are not used to regular writing in their previous schools while others lack basic English skills.

As for the format of reflective journal writing, unlike other genres, there is no specific format for reflective journal writing. Its format could be free which allows students to write as they like or structured where teachers give a specific format for the students. Whatever, the format chosen, teachers have to ensure that the reflective journal writing process should be flexible enough to enable the students to choose topics, test new ideas, comment on personal behaviours, and describe feelings. Through this, their critical reflection skills will be developed and eventually transform their learning, self-confidence, engagement, and self-discovery (Carter & Kurtts, 2019). In

terms of the characteristics of reflective journal writing, the Learning Centre, of the University of New South Wales (2008) identifies some characteristics of reflective journal writing that it contains:

- students' response to experiences, opinions, events or new information
- students' response to thoughts and feelings
- students' way of thinking to explore their learning
- an opportunity to gain self-knowledge
- a way to achieve clarity and a better understanding of what they are learning
- a chance to develop and reinforce writing skills
- a way of making meaning out of what they study

## Theoretical Underpins Reflective Journal Writing

Theoretically, reflective journal writing is based on many learning theories such as Dewey's theory of reflection. He sees reflection as a process of making meaning where students associate information with the experience they have had in-depth and connect with other ideas (Rodgers, 2002a). Dewey (1916, p. 38) believes that learning should not be "an affair of telling and being told, but an active and constructive process". Therefore, through reflective journal writing, learners would put the hypothesis they have shaped about language into use. Reflection according to Moon (1999) "a form of mental processing with a purpose and anticipated outcome that is applied to relatively complex or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution". Based on Dewey's definition of reflection, Rodgers (2002b) identified four stages in the reflection process namely; presence in experience: learning to see, description of the experience: learning to describe and differentiate, analysis: learning to think critically and create theory, and experimentation: learning to take intelligent action. Reflection is largely seen as an experience. Grimmett and Erickson (1988) see reflection as a state of mind which enables a person to think about previous actions or experiences to prevent failure in the future. This explains the paradox that "one cannot know without acting and one cannot act without knowing."

Reflective journal writing is also supported by Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory where he believes that knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. He outlined a four-stage model that leads to effective learning: (a) concrete experience, (b) reflective observation, (c) abstract conceptualization, and (d) active experimentation. It is a cyclical model of learning where learners may begin at any stage and then follow the sequence.

## Previous Studies on Reflective Journal Writing

Reflective journal writing has been investigated by many researchers in many countries and has proven to be effective in developing various aspects of students' writing skills. For instance, Siahaan, Ping, Aridah, and Asih, (2021) examine the influence of reflective journal writing on the writing competence and motivation of high school students in Indonesia. They collected the data from 70 students using a writing competence questionnaire and interviews. The results of the study show a significant simultaneous effect of reflective journal writing on the students' writing competence and motivation. The study further discovered the students' willingness and desire to engage in EFL writing because they considered it a fun activity, enjoyment activity, satisfaction, and effort of facing problems. In another study, Sudirman, Gemilang and Kristanto (2021) investigated the impact of a reflective journal writing on Indonesian students' writing performance, especially on their ability to communicate ideas. The findings of the study show the usefulness of the reflective journal in helping the students to make critical reflections and self-discovery in their writing. It also helps the students to focus on unity, coherence, cohesiveness, content, and organization of ideas in their writing. similarly, Ni'ma, Sumardi, and Tarjana, (2020) discovered that reflective journal writing is more effective than the traditional writing methods in promoting students' writing skills. It also increases their motivation toward writing.

In Iran, Kouhpeyma, and Kashefian-Naeeini (2020) examine the influence of reflective journal writing on the writing performance of Iranian EFL learners using control and experimental groups. The findings of the study reveal that there is no significant difference in the mean scores of the control and the experimental groups. This shows a little influence of reflective journal writing. However, the study observed the difference in the participants' ages contribute to the little differences observed in the mean scores. In their study, Jannah, Usman, Daud, Muslem, and Abdul Samad, (2020) investigated the impact of reflective journal writing on the writing performance of Indonesian high school students writing performance. They categorised the participants into control and experimental groups and then collected the data using pre-and post-treatment writing tasks. The findings of the study show a significant difference between the mean scores of the control and the experimental group. In a similar study in Mexico, May-Melendez, Balderas-Garza, Alcocer-Vazquez, and Quijano-Zavala (2019) examine learners' perception of reflective journal writing in their learning process in Mexico. The findings of the study reveal the students' positive perceptions of a reflective journal writing. However, they do not like writing reflective

journals in all courses. Thus, the study suggests that teachers should vary the use of reflective journal writing in their teaching.

Tsingos-Lucas, Bosnic-Anticevich, Schneider and Smith, (2017) investigated the relationship of reflective-writing skills with academic success. The results of the study show that reflective-writing skills were found to be a predictor of student academic performance in written examination, oral assessment tasks and overall score for the Unit of study. Finally, Amirkhanovaa, Ageevab, and Fakhretdinov (2016) explore the impact of reflective journal writing on students' learning motivation to learn English as a foreign language in Russia. The findings show that reflective journal writing increases students learning motivation as well as self-confidence. In the Libyan context, Rushton, and Duggan (2013) discovered that cultural practices influence students' performance and interest in reflective journal writing. Specifically, they revealed that reflective journal writing was not part of the Libyan educational culture. Thus, students may not find it interesting the first time. However, for over a decade now the situation may not have been the same.

From the studies reviewed so far, it is evident that the reflective journal writing strategy is rarely used in the Libyan context. This has proven the findings of the previous studies that many Libyan EFL teachers lack the awareness of effective approaches and strategies for teaching English that would improve the students' performance in English (Mohsen, 2014). It also supports the discoveries of the previous studies that most Libyan EFL teachers heavily rely on the traditional methods of teaching that emphasize extensive linguistic input rather than communicative output (Diaab, 2016). Therefore, this necessitates the need to adopt reflective journal writing in the teaching and learning of EFL writing in the Libyan setting. Hopefully, it would improve the students' writing performance as it does in other countries.

## Procedures for implementing reflective journal

Rodgers (2002b) identifies the following steps which teachers could use to implement reflective journals in their classrooms.

1. Presence in experience (learning to see) the students have to participate actively in the class activities to be able to write a reflective journal. In this step according to Rodgers, teachers should give writing prompts that would help students to recall their previous knowledge related to the topic or concepts learned in the class. For instance, questions such as: "what you have learned, what difficulties you have found, how you have overcome them, what is the relationship of prior knowledge with the material to be learned? Should be asked." Also, the questions or writing prompts should be related to materials given by the teachers to enable the students to interact with friends after the class.

2. Description of experience (Learning to describe and differentiate): In this step the students should write to describe all the have learned in the previous class; present all the information relevant to the material obtained from previous activities in the journal. Teachers should give questions or writing prompts that would help the students to recall the activities such as . Finally, the students should read out all they have written to choose relevant ideas and cross out the unrelated ones.

3. Analysis of experience (Learning to think critically and create theory): Here the students should analyse the ideas/ the information written and relate them with their previous knowledge or experience of the cognitive structure that students have as a reference in constructing new concepts. Teachers should give questions or writing prompts that can facilitate the students' writing such as "What sense can you make of the situation? Can you integrate theory into the experience/situation?"

4. Experimentation (Learning to take intelligent action): Here, the students should apply the concepts they have learned in other things such as in daily life. Teachers should give questions or writing prompts that would help the students to apply the concepts, such as how can you use the concepts YX to to solve a particular problem.

## Implementing RJW in the Libyan Setting

To successfully implement the RJW strategy in a writing classroom, teachers are at liberty to choose the strategy suitable to them based on the curriculum and the ability or level of their students. First, students could be asked to write a reflective journal after every class for 12 weeks of the semester.

Secondly, the students could be asked to write after every two weeks for 12 weeks. This means the six RJWs will be produced before the end of the semester.

Finally, the students could be asked to write RJ after every four weeks which means that only three RJWs will be produced before the end of the semester. This is similar to the strategies used by Amirkhanovaa, Ageevab, and Fakhretdinov, (2016) where they administer three sets of questions to students to write about at different times. In the first set, the students should be asked to describe the learning materials with the help of five questions such as: 'What new fact did I learn throughout this week?', 'What's my reaction to a particular topic in the lecture?'

In the second set of questions, the students were asked to evaluate the knowledge or understanding gained from the class using the questions such as: 'Do I understand what I have learnt?'

In the third set of questions, the students were asked to explain their attitudes and behaviours toward the class. Questions such as: 'How can I make the strategy more effective?', and 'What can I do to get a better

understanding?' were used. Amirkhanovaa, Ageevab, and Fakhretdinov, (2016) consider three RJW in a semester as the basic. It could be understood that anything less than three may not yield the desired result because the students may not have enough opportunity to reflect and write about their experiences in the class throughout the semester. The authors also suggested that a maximum of 30% grade should be awarded to students for keeping RJW in a semester. Thus, teachers should decide based on the activities of the class in the semester to award the marks for the RJW.

Whatever strategy of RJW a teacher is adopting in his/her class (whether 3, 6 or 12 RJW in a semester), the writing prompt or questions given to the students should take care of the following:

1.The students must be asked to write about their experiences in the class. These include what they learnt, their feeling towards the class, their likes and dislikes, experiences with the learning materials and peers, the teacher's method of teaching, class activities, timing etc.

2.The students should be asked to think critically and analysed their learning experiences and create "theory". For instance,

3.Finally, students should be asked to experiment, take action or suggest actions based on their experiences in the class.

## Conclusions

The study aims to critically review the importance of reflective journal writing in developing undergraduates' writing in English with a view to providing Libyan EFL teachers with a new strategy. The paper reveals that reflective journal writing enhances students' writing and other learning skills such as critical thinking, metacognition, motivation, self-reflection, and macro-and micro-linguistic knowledge. The study also identifies stages and methods by which to implement reflective journal writing in their classroom. There are some limitations to the study. It is a literature review. An experimental study should be carried out to provide evidence on the effect of RJW on the Libyan EFL writing performance. Despite the limitation, the study is useful to EFL teachers as it creates awareness of Libyan EFL teachers of the need for reflective journal writing in the Libyan context. The study will also guide further researchers in the field.

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