

## **The impact of reflective journals on the writing skills of EFL sophomore students**

*El impacto de los diarios reflexivos en las habilidades de la escritura inglesa de los estudiantes de primer año de bachillerato*

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research paper describes a mixed-methods study with a one group, pretest- posttest design that aimed to analyze the effects of writing reflective journals on the writing skills of 25 EFL sophomore learners. It also examined the participants' perceptions of reflective journals as a learning strategy. The data were collected in two phases. In the first phase, a pre-test and a post-test were applied to gather the quantitative data. The researchers employed a writing assessment rubric to score the pre- and post-tests to assess the students' EFL proficiency level. And in the second phase, participants were required to fill out an open-ended questionnaire of six questions to collect the qualitative data. It was demonstrated that reflective journals had a positive impact on the participants' writing skills development and that they were perceived as a helpful learning strategy to boost English proficiency. These findings could help EFL students improve their meta-cognitive skills, which are required in the Ecuadorian curriculum.

**Keywords:** Communicative competence; writing skills; expressive language; language acquisition.

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## RESUMEN

Este trabajo de investigación describe un estudio de métodos mixtos con un diseño de un solo grupo, pretest-posttest, cuyo objetivo fue analizar los efectos de la redacción de diarios de reflexión en las destrezas de escritura de 25 estudiantes de Inglés como lengua extranjera de primer año de bachillerato. También se examinaron las percepciones de los participantes sobre los diarios de reflexión como estrategia de aprendizaje. Los datos se recogieron en dos fases. En la primera, se aplicaron un pretest y un posttest para recoger los datos cuantitativos. Los investigadores emplearon una rúbrica de evaluación de la escritura para puntuar las pruebas previas y posteriores y evaluar el nivel de competencia lingüística en el idioma Inglés de los estudiantes. Y en la segunda fase, se pidió a los participantes que respondieran un cuestionario de seis preguntas abiertas, para recoger los datos cualitativos. Se demostró que los diarios de reflexión tuvieron un impacto positivo en el desarrollo de las destrezas de escritura de los participantes y que fue percibida como una estrategia de aprendizaje útil para mejorar el dominio del inglés. Estos resultados podrían ayudar a los estudiantes de Inglés como lengua extranjera a mejorar sus habilidades metacognitivas, requeridas en el currículo ecuatoriano.

**Palabras claves:** Competencia comunicativa; habilidades de escritura; lenguaje expresivo; adquisición del lenguaje.

## 1. Introduction

Being able to think critically about one's own education is an important skill for keeping one's mind open to updated information day by day. It is widely agreed that the purpose of education is to prepare students for their future development as professionals by having them engage in reflective activities that promote lifetime learning skills (Alt et al., 2022). According to Griggs et al. (2018), students' ability to make good judgments based on their emotions, which they gain via reflective practice during their academic formation, has been linked to their later success in both their personal and professional lives. As well, Ramlal and Augustin (2019) stated that reflective practices involve complex introspective and metacognitive processes that are connected to critical thinking and self-reflection. In this context, the authors claim that there are certain strategies such as writing reflective journals, that can enhance reflective thinking and develop language abilities in EFL students.

Learning English is perceived by many learners as a challenging process due to the difficulties they have to face to master the four EFL linguistic skills: reading, listening, writing, and speaking. Writing is regarded as one of the most important skills to cultivate because it is required to function in society (Jannah et al., 2020). In this light, Srinawati and Alwi (2020) claimed that identifying and expressing thoughts on paper in a way that is logical and reasonable may be challenging. Because of this, learners need to do a good job organizing the linguistic system so that it can be comprehended. Writing may be seen as the graphic representation of language, where language is represented symbolically via the use of graphic signals. It is a system that, unlike speech, cannot simply be acquired but rather has to be learned through consistent, deliberate effort in order to function properly (Crossley, 2020).

In Ecuador, the Ministry of Education, in its national curricula (MINEDUC, 2019), points out the importance of the students' achieving metacognitive skills in order to develop meaningful communicative abilities such as writing. It suggests that teachers plan their lessons by applying strategies that encourage learners to reflect on their self-awareness during the process of learning. In this context, reflective journals as a learning strategy to boost EFL learners' proficiency could offer many benefits toward this objective. The aim of the present study is to analyze whether or not EFL sophomore learners improve their writing abilities after reflective journals' intervention. Furthermore, this research attempts to interpret the perceptions of these students toward reflective journals as an EFL learning strategy.

This research article starts by presenting the theoretical and empirical background of EFL writing skills and reflective journal writing as a learning strategy. Additionally, other challenges that have impacted the learning process of EFL learners' writing abilities in recent years are discussed. Next, this research paper presents in detail the methodology of the study, the participants, the data collection instruments, and the analysis of the data. The results are presented later in the document along with the discussion and conclusions.

## **1.1. Conceptual Framework**

### **1.1.1 EFL Writing skills**

The writing skill in the EFL learning process is an important ability that learners need to develop in order to effectively communicate own ideas and thoughts to any audience. Writing is a productive skill that is assessed when students present their final product using the target language (Eliwarti & Purwanti, 2021). In this context, writing is defined as a thinking procedure where learners discover their own knowledge using their cognitive and metacognitive capacities to produce a well written piece (Esmail et al., 2022). Moreover, in the path of developing EFL writing skills, the writer's brain is highly active, controlling and monitoring the production of written language (Teng, 2020). Kim et al. (2021) described the writing skill as one of the most challenging ability to master in EFL because learners have to coordinate several cognitive processes such as planning, monitoring, examining and choosing their best coherent ideas and thoughts to be represented in written texts. In terms of developing academic writing, Nückles et al. (2020) mentioned that learning writing by using journals or essays may help students become independent to expand their ideas about any topic matter in order to create lasting knowledge.

### **1.1.2 Challenges of EFL Writing**

English as a foreign language always has always seen by EFL learners as a hard language to learn. Developing writing ability in English needs a great mental effort to succeed in the production of written pieces (Selvaraj & Aziz, 2019). In this context, some of the main issues that

students face at the time of writing their ideas or thoughts are lack of vocabulary, grammar issues in cohesion and syntax, poor spelling, and readiness which provoke them anxiety, and as a result they struggle to write effectively (Moses & Mohamad, 2019). In a study conducted by Sabti et al. (2019), it was found that writing is characterized as a challenging skill to develop by EFL learners. The pressure that EFL students feel for mastering English writing skills sometimes is enormous and could result in high levels of anxiety; as consequence, learners feel demotivation and apathy to performing writing tasks (Sabti et al., 2019). Moreover, Arindra and Ardi (2020) argued that many EFL learners describe the acquisition of writing ability as a frustrating process where aspects as generating inner thoughts, organizing those ideas, and translating them into written language in a period of time are mentioned as the most difficult to perform.

### ***1.1.3 Reflective writing***

Reflective writing is a learning strategy that brings several benefits to the development of thinking skills on students. According to Deveci and Ayish (2021) reflective writing can aid learners to think about their own beliefs, behaviors, and educational experiences which can help to gain new knowledge and understanding through learning activities. In other words, writing reflective diaries can help that students comprehend better the learning process and become more actively involved in their education.

Developing EFL writing skills has two primary aims as mentioned by Salahi and Farahian (2021). First, writing promotes critical thinking by requiring students to direct attention and organize their thoughts; as a result, English learners expand their capacity for summarizing, analyzing and critiquing. Writing can also facilitate learning, reflection, and thinking in the target language. In this context, Jannah et al. (2020) stated that reflective journal writing can help EFL learners reflect on their personal thoughts, activities, and learning experiences in order to get new insight into self-learning which improves their comprehension in English and keeps them actively engaged in the learning process. In addition, reflective writing has a flexible procedure that allows EFL students to select what ideas they want to include on their compositions, comment on self-behaviour and convey emotions at the same time (Sudirman et al., 2021).

### ***1.1.4 Reflective Journal as writing technique in EFL learning***

A reflective journal is a sequential chronicle of facts and ideas, which contains the personal comments, observations, experiences and perspectives of the writer (Vuong & Le, 2021). When writing journals, EFL learners can share their own ideas and thoughts based on analysis, evaluation and inner reflection about what they want to communicate to others (Eliwarti & Purwanti, 2021). Additionally, reflective journals promote independence in the acquisition of knowledge in

a process where the learners are the main actors of the class, which means students are not only passively receiving information from their teacher but they are developing their critical thinking to later express their ideas and thoughts (Chang, 2019).

According to Sudirman et al. (2021) the reflective journal writing technique has a great value in the learning of EFL writing as it encourages students to recognize their capacity in terms of strengths and weaknesses on the acquisition of the English language. Furthermore, EFL learners develop honesty, self-discovery and self improvement which have a satisfactoring impact on the students' learning, empowering them to be critical and reflective (Nanwani, 2021). Equally, Ramadhanti et al. (2020) stated that writing reflecting journals as a learning technique in EFL gives numerous benefits to English learners in the developing of writing abilities. For instance, it promotes intellectual skills, initiates self-reflections, develops critical thinking and sharp writing skills. During this learning process EFL students have to plan, monitor and assess their own understanding and performance which helps them to become independent learners.

## 1.2 Literature Review

Writing proficiency in any language is one of the most important ability that is required in our day to day life (Srinawati & Alwi, 2020). In this regard, Sani et al. (2017) and Jannah et al. (2020) stated on their investigations that the writing skill is needed in many areas of life in the global society. For example, effective writing is required in educational contexts where students and professionals have to develop a specific type of academic writing style.

In Pedagogy, reflective journal writing has been tested in studies to develop the creativity and academic awareness of EFL students writing abilities. Fayyad Abuhussein (2022) indicated on her research that the use of reflective journals to expand creative writing had a positive impact on the EFL learners' attitudes toward English learning. Furthermore, the multiple benefits that reflective writing brings to express inner ideas, feelings and thoughts has been investigated as well. For instance, Argudo (2021) and Atariguana (2021) mentioned on the results of their studies that expressive writing is an anxiety reducer which allows students to communicate their feelings and emotions without the tension of being judged. It means that this type of writing helps to relief the academic stress and anxiety that are very common on students specially before an exam. Both researchers stated the expressive writing strategy has a positive impact in the process of learning by enhancing working memory capacity.

However Wardani and Mbato (2021) conducted a study focused in comparing the relationship between anxiety and self-efficacy in critical writing in 29 participants who were divided in 2 groups: graduated and undergraduated EFL students in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. They found that the writing task increased the level of anxiety of the students at the time they were making their compositions which affected their writing efficacy. Similary, Prasetyaningrum et al. (2021) stated that EFL learners showed anxiety performing their writing assignments due to the fear of criticism from their teacher. Language challenges pressure to produce flawless works, time constraints, and low writing confidence are potential factors that increase anxiety.

A study conducted by Jannah et al. (2020) in which they researched the impact of the use of reflective journals on the improvement of writing skills. In this research two senior high school groups (control and treatment group) were included to determine what were the effects of writing reflective journals on the students learning process. The results showed that the students who were trained through reflective journal writing improved their writing ability in terms of ideas, content, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics usage in comparison with those who were not trained through this strategy. The researchers also found that students's responses were positive toward the implementation of reflective journal because they were able to express their ideas which helped to them +to increase their confidence and motivation to write in English. Another research study was presented by Habibi et al. (2018). The researchers analyzed the effectiveness of using reflective journal writing in the improvement of students' writing skills in narrative texts. This study was conducted with 273 students of the tenth grade. The findings indicated that the use of reflective journal writing had a beneficial impact on the improvement of students' narrative text writing skills.

## 2. Methodology

This research study used a mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2014). The mixed approach entails collecting quantitative and qualitative data and then analyzing the combined results to gain a deeper understanding of the investigation. This study was separated into two phases (QUAN-qual). The first part of this study was quantitative. It involved administering a pre- and post-test writing task adapted from the English Test KET (Cambridge, 2020). The qualitative data collection process consisted of the application of an individual questionnaire adapted from Jannah et al. (2020). A One group, Pretest-Posttest Design (Cranmer, 2017) was conducted to analyze the participants' EFL writing proficiency before and after writing reflective journals over a four-week period.

The participants were 25 EFL sophomore students of a public Ecuadorian school located in the city of Santo Domingo. The selection of the participants for this study was done through a convenience sample (Bhardwaj, 2019) since the researcher was assigned to work as the English teacher of this group from the beginning of the school year 2022-2023. There were 15 female and 10 male participants aged 15 and 16 years old; most of them were 15 years old ( $n = 16$ ; 64%). They study English for three hours per week, following the Ecuadorian EFL Curriculum, and their level of English proficiency is A2 Basic user (MINEDUC, 2019). All participants in this research were required to have a signed informed consent granted by their parents. For ethical considerations, the information collected during this study has been kept strictly confidential (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). That is, the names of the students were coded with numbers.

## 2.1 Data collection instruments

### 2.1.1 A pre- post test

To assess the level of English proficiency in participants' writing ability before and after using reflective journals as a method of instruction, a pre-posttest writing task adapted from the English Test KET (Cambridge, 2020) was used. The components evaluated were content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. Students were required to write an e-mail in English in response to an assigned prompt in these pre-post writing tasks. The writing task required an email with an extension of 25–35 words. Participants had one hour in class for the tests.

The tests were rated out of 100. The highest grade for content was 30, meaning that students' writing was well supported, complied with the goal of the text, and was written extremely well. The organization was given 20 points for its well-structured composition and for staying on topic. In addition, the vocabulary score was 20 when the writer made good use of the words. Moreover, when the writing displayed proper English grammar, the participants received a score of 25 for this component. And the last component of the writing skill rubric was mechanics, which received five points when it followed the standard writing format and made appropriate use of capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. The percentage of each component was determined by comparing the results from the pre- and post-test to evaluate the impact of reflective journals on EFL sophomore students' writing abilities.

### 2.1.2 Questionnaire

A questionnaire with six open-ended questions classified in three dimensions motivation and self-confidence (questions 1–2), writing improvement (3–4), and reflection development (questions 5–6) was applied. Ten participants who were randomly selected (Bhardwaj, 2019) completed this questionnaire in a face to face session. The main aim of this questionnaire was to collect students' perceptions toward using reflective journals as a learning strategy in the development of EFL writing skills. To ensure that the sample size could deeply reflect, understand, and express their opinions and perceptions the questionnaire was administered in the participants' native language, Spanish. After the process of collecting the students' perceptions, their answers were transcribed, and the transcriptions were translated into English. The explanation for this process is described by Filep (2009), who stated that the administration of perception's instruments and subsequent translation of data constitute complicated situations in which not only the language but also the 'culture' must be translated or interpreted and dealt with by the translator or interpreter.

## 2.2 Procedure

Before beginning the process of data collection, the researcher had a meeting with the authorities of the school, participants, and their legal representatives to present the goal of the study and to answer any questions that they might have had. The participation of 25 EFL students was authorized by their legal representatives through a signed consent letter. During an inductive week, each participant was given a folder that contained information and material related to the writing process (Zemach & Rumisek, 2005) to work on.

This research was performed during seven weeks, including the inductive week. The process of data collection was carried out in two phases. The first part of the study research was aimed at treating the quantitative information. The participants completed a pre-test task of writing as the first step in this phase to evaluate their proficiency in EFL writing skills. Then the students had to write an entry in their reflective journals every day for four weeks. To write the reflective journals, participants were assigned a daily question prompt (Cengiz, 2020) to reflect on and complete the task. The reflective journals were collected by the teacher (researcher) every week. Journals were read and general oral feedback was provided at the beginning of the following week. As the next step, the group students completed a post-test designed to measure their EFL writing abilities after the process of writing the journals. Following that, each participant completed an open-ended questionnaire about their perceptions toward writing reflective journals as a learning strategy.

## 2.3 Data analysis

### 2.3.1 Quantitative data

The quantitative data processing was performed in the SPSS V27 statistical program, the student's t-test for related samples was used to compare the averages between the pre- and post-test and the Wilcoxon test was applied to compare the number of students with positive changes and ties, the statistical significance was 1% ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Furthermore, students' performance is expressed as a percentage of learning achievement according to the maximum score for each writing component. Finally, the results are shown in comparison to the Ecuadorian evaluation system.

### 2.3.2 Qualitative data

The qualitative data for this study was collected in a face to face session through an open-ended questionnaire. The transcriptions of the participants' perceptions were subjected to content analysis in an attempt to identify common themes or patterns (Haven & Grootel, 2019) about students' responses to utilizing reflective journals as an EFL learning strategy.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Quantitative results

Before the intervention, the performance of all assessed components of writing reached practically half of the maximum possible score, while after the intervention the scores were between 72% and 82%. The component least developed initially by the students was mechanics, when the relevant comparison was made, significant differences were identified in all the components with an increase from 23% to 36% of their skills and 26.4% in the total score. (Table 1).

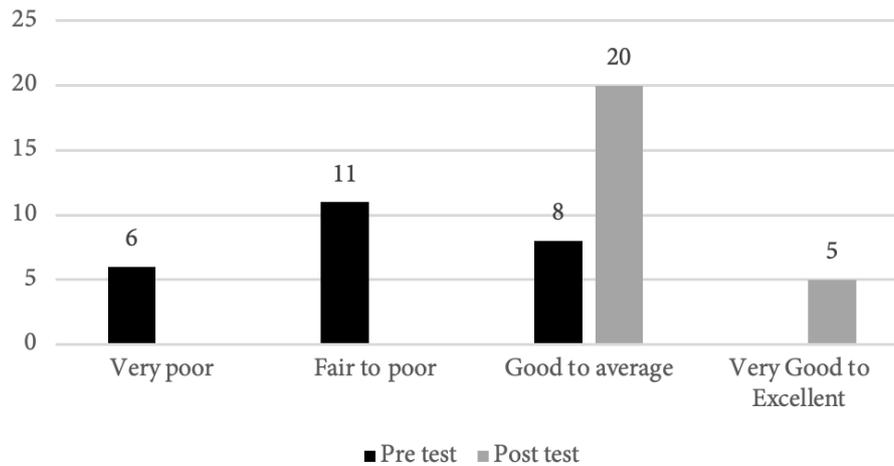
Table 1. Writing skills components

Component		Mean	SD	Performance percentage	Difference (%)	t	p
Content /30	Pre test	15,8	7,6	52,67	30,0	-6,647	<.001
	Post test	24,8	4,2	82,67			
Organization / 20	Pre test	9,4	3	47,00	25,0	-8,66	<.001
	Post test	14,4	3	72,00			
Vocabulary /20	Pre test	9,8	3,4	49,00	23,0	-8,048	<.001
	Post test	14,4	3	72,00			
Grammar /25	Pre test	13	4,8	52,00	24,0	-8,485	<.001
	Post test	19	2,9	76,00			
Mechanics /5	Pre test	1,9	0,8	38,00	36,0	-9,859	<.001
	Post test	3,7	0,9	74,00			
Total score /100	Pre test	49,9	18,5	49,90	26,4	-9,659	<.001
	Post test	76,3	11,6	76,30			

Source: Field research

Before the intervention, according to the criteria of the English KET Test Cambridge Exam (Heaton, 1988), more than half of the students (n=17; 68%) presented a very poor and fair to poor performance in writing while after the intervention, the majority (n=20; 80%) presented a good to average performance and some even reached the very good to excellent category (n=5; 20%). (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Criteria writing assessment.



Source: Field research

Table 2 shows the changes in the grades obtained in the components of writing assessed. It was identified that in all of them there were positive changes or ties; the components with the highest number of students with positive changes were: grammar and mechanics.

Table 2. Changes in writing components before and after the intervention

		Content	Organization	Vocabulary	Grammar	Mechanics	Total score
Positive change	n	19	21	20	22	22	25
	%	76,0	84,0	80,0	88,0	88,0	100,0
Draws	n	6	4	5	3	3	0
	%	24,0	16,0	20,0	12,0	12,0	0,0
Z (p)		3,895 (<0,01)	4,291 (<0,01)	4,234 (<0,01)	4,278 (<0,01)	4,218 (<0,01)	4,384 (<0,01)

Source: Field research

Finally, when comparing the results of the students and according to the mandatory evaluation scale of the Ecuadorian educational system, before the intervention the students presented scores between 2.1 and 7.9 as an average of 4.9 which implies that they were close to achieving the required learning; 24% (n=6) of students did not achieve the required learning and 60% (n=15) of students were close to achieving it, and the last 16% (n=4) achieved the required learning. However, after the intervention the scores ranged between 5.7 and 10 points with an average of 7.6 which indicates that they achieved the required learning. In addition, it was identified that 28% (n=7) were closed to achieved the required learning, 60% (n=15) of students achieved the required learning, and 12% (n=3) mastered it. (Table 3).

Table 3. Evaluation scale for the compulsory education system in Ecuador pre and post test.

Evaluation scale for the compulsory education system in Ecuador		Pre test		Post test	
		%	n	%	
Level	Does not reach the required learning	6	24.0	0,0	0,0
	Close to achieving the required learning	15	60.0	7	28.0
	Achieve the required learning	4	16.0	15	60.0
	Master the required learning	0	0.0	3	12.0
Score	Min		2.1		5.7
	Max		7.9		10.0
	Mean		4.9		7.6
	SD		1.8		1.2

Source: Field research

### 3.2 Qualitative results

The qualitative findings concern an examination of how EFL students felt about writing reflective journals. This section provides an interpretation of the participants' views about using reflective journals and their effect on writing skills. The information gathered by the qualitative instrument was divided into these three dimensions: motivation and self-confidence, writing improvement and reflection development. The results of the qualitative analysis of the transcriptions provided insight into which components of writing the students believed they had improved as a result of using reflective journals and which challenges they had to deal with during the intervention.

The first dimension revealed that some students perceived their motivation to write in English boosted, as well as their self-confidence for expressing their feelings. For instance, participant 1 said: *"Yes, I felt motivated knowing that I could learn or live new experiences and then be able to write them down, it also motivated me to do better than I did before."* Due to their increased motivation to write, students had a relaxing experience expressing their ideas and thoughts. *"Yes, I felt motivated because I find it relaxing to have a diary where I can tell about new or different things and experiences during the week"* (Participant 2). Other students perceived that their motivation to express their inner thoughts raised as long as they kept writing reflective journals, as it can be portrayed through the following quotes: *"Yes, because I was telling my point of view on a daily basis and that motivated me to write and to continue writing in the future"* (Participant 4). *"Yes I felt motivated to write my experiences, emotions, my routine, etc., and much more if it is in a different language in this case English, because I know that now I am more fluent in writing thanks to the reflective diaries"* (Participant 5). In addition, some students felt that writing reflective journals helped them to improve their self-confidence, which inspired them to complete their writing tasks, as the next quotes illustrate. *"At first it was difficult because I didn't feel confident enough to write down my experiences, but then I started to feel more confident and it became easier"* (Participant 6). *"Yes, I felt a lot of confidence, and my responsibility inspired me to write"* (Participant 7).

On the other side, some students reported feeling uncomfortable about exposing their feelings in their piece of writing. For example, Participant 8 said: *“No, because this was very uncomfortable and it did not give me any confidence knowing that someone is going to read my thoughts or experiences.”* Another student stated that it was difficult and stressful to come up with enough ideas in such a short period of time. *“A little bit because I didn’t feel very confident to finish on time and that stressed me out,”* said Participant 10.

The second dimension refers to the feeling of improvement in terms of writing fluency. As an example, Participant 4 mentioned, *“Yes, there is a difference because in the last four weeks I have written about my experiences in English more fluently.”* Some students agree that using reflective journals as an EFL learning strategy improved their fluency because it increased their vocabulary and sharpened their English grammar, as expressed in the following quotes. *“I can express my thoughts more easily and fluently, I learnt about technical words that help me to improve my writing in English”* (Participant 5). *“I consider that my skills have improved, I still make mistakes, but they are few, and now I recognize words better and I understand them”* (Participant 6). Some students also testified that their understanding of certain terms and topics improved during the intervention. *“I manage to write on different topics in a better way”* (Participant 8).

On the contrary, other students’ testimonials perceived this EFL learning technique as a slow process for learning English. They said: *“I consider that they improved a little, not much, just a little”* (Participant 9). *“A little better; as the days went by, I improved, but not enough”* (Participant 10).

The last dimension showed that several students recognized reflective journals as a vehicle for reflection development; hence, they discerned that this learning technique promoted reflection on thinking skills and fostered their autonomous learning abilities, as we cite in the next quotes. *“It is much easier now to express myself, even my vocabulary has expanded more, now I can reflect and write with more agility on any topic”* (Participant 3). *“Now I can reflect and write any topic in English with this learning technique and I learned more English words”* (Participant 5).

On the other hand, some students reported feeling frustrated due to the pressure to generate coherent ideas during the intervention. For example, Participant 8 said: *“It was a little frustrating, since knowing how to answer was not easy, and since thinking of a long and coherent answer in English is a little bit difficult.”* As a result, reflective journals was perceived as a non-effective EFL learning strategy, as it is mentioned in the following quote. *“Difficult for me, because writing journals was not a significant learning because I was helping myself with the translator and I don’t think it is easy now to reflect or write about any topic for me”* (Participant 9).

In summary, participants stated they increased their motivation and self-confidence to express their ideas and thoughts by writing reflective journals as an EFL learning technique because it helped them boost their fluency, vocabulary, and English grammar. Furthermore, participants pointed out that they developed their competence to reflect on different topics by writing reflective journals, which strengthened their writing skills. Nevertheless, some participants mentioned

some challenges associated with the use of reflective journals, such as the lack of confidence to express their feelings for fear of being read by others, as well as the stress and frustration caused by the need to generate coherent ideas in a short period of time.

#### 4. Discussion

In response to the first research question, about the impact of writing reflective journals on the writing skills of EFL sophomore learners, the quantitative data collected indicated that all 25 participants significantly upgraded each writing component, after the intervention, demonstrating that writing reflective journals had a positive effect on the development of the writing skills and that it is an effective learning approach for enhancing the writing abilities. As Jannah et al. (2020) observed, reflective journals influenced the improvement of writing skills measured by the component criteria of content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics, where the most ranked component was mechanics. As a result, it helped students enhance their English proficiency level. The findings of the present study also demonstrated that after the intervention, participants improved their EFL writing in all the writing components, as evidenced by the post-test results, with a significant increase in each of these components, with mechanics being the most improved as well. Another study conducted by Habibi et al. (2018) stated that writing reflective journals is an effective strategy to improve EFL students' writing abilities. There were similar findings in the present research. It showed that students increased their range of performance in EFL writing skills using reflective journals as a learning strategy. As supporting evidence, the majority of participants reached good to average performance, and some even achieved the very good to excellent category after the intervention.

For the purpose of answering the second research question, the qualitative data was analyzed, and it showed that students perceived that writing reflective journals helped them to improve their intrinsic motivation and self-confidence to write, as well as their fluency in writing because it boosted their vocabulary and sharpened their grammar; in addition, it promoted reflection on their thinking skills, and consequently, participants had a relaxing experience expressing their ideas and thoughts with confidence. Likewise, important findings were found in a similar study; as Fayyad Abuhussein (2022) asserted, EFL learners had positive attitudes towards the use of reflective journals as a learning strategy because they foster their thinking skills; even the researcher recommended including this strategy in the English curricula of schools and universities due to its benefits in the teaching-learning process of the English language. As well, Argudo (2021) and Atariguana (2022) discovered in their research that when students wrote about their own experiences, they felt more at ease sharing their thoughts and feelings.

On the other hand, the present study also found that some participants had negative perceptions about reflective journals because of how stressful it could be to generate coherent ideas in a short time and the fear of being judged by the exposure of their thoughts. Despite the fact that the same participants recognized that it was a challenging process, they improved their writing skills. Equally important outcomes were detailed in a similar research study conducted by Wardani and

Mbato (2021), where they compared the connection between anxiety and self-efficacy in EFL learners at the time of performing a writing task and concluded that students' self-efficacy could be negatively affected by the anxiety that produces writing tasks. Prasetyaningrum et al. (2021) reached similar conclusions after studying how EFL students felt about writing assignments. These authors determined that students felt afraid and anxious about their teacher's criticism after their compositions were read, although they also were aware they needed their teacher's feedback to improve their writing skills.

## 5. Conclusion

This study achieved its objective of analyzing the effects of reflective journals as a learning strategy on the development of EFL sophomore students. After exploring the collected data in this research, it might be inferred that reflective journals had positive effects on the development of EFL students' writing skills for several reasons. The first one is that in this research study it was found that the majority of participants, after being assessed on their post-test, presented significant improvement in their English proficiency on writing skills as evidence of using the target language after the intervention. Similarly, the second reason to conclude that reflective journals had a positive impact on students' writing skills was that participants reported improving their writing fluency after using reflective journals as a learning strategy, as a result of having expanded their vocabulary and sharpened their grammar, which is sustainable evidence that reflective journals can help students gain a deeper understanding of their learning process and take more responsibility for their own education. Likewise, the last reason that demonstrated the beneficial impact of the reflective journals on the academic learning process was the participants' increased level of reflectiveness, which promoted autonomous learning and enhanced students' writing abilities to pass from a passive to an active state, developing critical thinking and the confidence to communicate their feelings and thoughts.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that some limitations were found during the development of this research which are related to the short period of time to apply this learning strategy and the size of the sample. Further research could be conducted with more participants, a control group, and during a semester or school year to examine if the practice of writing reflective journals could be sustained overtime with the same positive results.

To conclude, writing reflective journals is a learning strategy that is helpful in the teaching and learning process of English as a foreign language. It boosts students' motivation and self-confidence to express their ideas and thoughts; in addition, it strengthens writing fluency, which fosters the development of their metacognitive skills, as required by the curriculum of the Ministry of Education of Ecuador. Hence, we highly recommend the implementation of reflective journals for different levels of EFL students to improve their English proficiency.

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