

**The Effect of a Protocol Based on Reflective Writing on
developing the EFL Writing Performance and Critical Thinking
of the Secondary School Students**

**Aya Said El-Sayed Abd El-Aziz
Faculty of Education, Zagazig University, Egypt**

Supervised by

**Dr. Bahaa El-Din Elsayed El-Naggar
Prof. of Curriculum and instruction (TEFL),
Faculty of Education, Zagazig University.**

Abstract

The main purpose of the current study was to develop EFL writing performance and critical thinking of the first-year secondary stage students by using a reflective writing protocol. The present study followed the quasi experimental research design (pre/posttest and experimental and control group). To achieve this end the researcher selected 50 EFL first year experimental secondary stage students randomly from Omar El-Farouk secondary school, Zagazig directorate, Sharkia governorate, Egypt. They were equally divided into two groups, 25 students for the experimental group and 25 for the control one. An EFL writing performance test was administered to measure EFL writing performance before and after the treatment, similarly, a critical thinking scale was administered before and after the treatment adopting the reflective writing protocol. This study lasted for the period of ten weeks during the second term of the school year 2021/2022. The findings of the study showed that the reflective writing protocol was effective in developing the EFL writing performance of the secondary stage students and increasing their critical thinking.

Key words: Reflective Writing Protocol; EFL Writing Performance; Critical Thinking.

1.Introduction:

Writing is a process of communication that enables students to put their feelings and ideas on paper, to organize their knowledge and beliefs into believable arguments, and to convey meaning through a well-structured text. It enables students to emphasize grammar and vocabulary efficiently.

Writing is one of the basic language skills that should be acquired and practiced inside the classroom. Ellis (2006) declared that apparent learning leads to poor learning products, while deeper learning leads to understanding and improved writing. The writing process includes a period of investigation (brainstorming, discussion, and pre-writing) and integration (analysis, synthesis, and revision) that agree with the skills developed in cognitive development in the community of inquiry system.

Ahmed and Karunakaran (2013) stated that writing is a cultural invention, that has two dimensions. The first dimension looks at writing as a system of storing information and knowledge for future references and retrieval. Writing, as for the second dimension, is an instrument for thinking. According to the second dimension, writing is a thinking process during which words are put together for conveying person's ideas and emotions. Thoughts do not have any real existence without being uttered or written down.

Hairston in Irma (2011:7) stated that writing is important because.

- a. It is a tool of discovery.
- b. It emirates new ideas by helping learners to make connections and relationships.
- c. It enables learners to absorb and process information, when they write a topic.
- d. It enables learners to solve problems by putting the different elements into the written form.
- e. It is an appropriate means for helping students express their creativity.

However, learning to write in the foreign language is one of the most difficult tasks that learners face and few of them are said to fully master. This is because of the fact that writing in a foreign language is a complex, challenging and difficult process that includes cognitive (linguistic competence of composing meta cognitive (awareness of purpose, audience and style), affective (being expressive of feeling as well as ideas) and social (being communicative and interactive with peers and the target reader) facto (Xiao–Xia, 2007:31). Additionally, writing is a productive skill in which learners need to use all tools they have like syntactic, lexical

and discorsal knowledge to carry out certain writing tasks. So, for writing coherently, fluently and suitably in English is seen by Nunan (1999:271) and Tang Perm Poon (2008:1), as the most difficult skill to acquire. That's why writing instruction is assuming a great role in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL).

Critical thinking is the ability to think clearly and rationally; it involves the ability to engage in reflective and independent thinking. It is an organised evaluation of the arguments, ideas and theories to others. It requires the learner to use the ability to reason. Critical thinkers diligently question ideas and assumptions rather than accepting them at face value as they are.

For Beers (2003, p.1) critical thinking involves the use of information, experience, and world knowledge in ways which allow EFL learners to seek alternatives, make inferences, pose questions, and solve problems, thereby signaling understanding in a variety of complex ways".

According to (Paul and Elder, 2001:4), critical thinking can be defined as "the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view of improving it". They also mentioned that critical thinking is self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored and self-corrective thinking. It requires rigorous standards of excellence and mindful command of their use.

To think critically is to analyze and evaluate information, reasoning and situations; according to appropriate standards, for the purpose of constructing sound and new knowledge, understandings, hypotheses and beliefs. Critical thinking encompasses the subject's ability to process and synthesis information in such a way that enables them to apply it to tasks for informed decision-making and effective problem-solving.

In spite of the great importance of critical thinking skills and the attempts for incorporating critical thinking skills in the textbook, it is obvious that critical thinking skills are the least skills implemented in the Egyptian curricula throughout the secondary stage and the most neglected skills in the Egyptian class so most Egyptian students are not educated as critical thinkers (Shahin, 2008; Moustafa, 2009; Abdellatif, 2012).

Reflective writing is an analytical practice in which the writer describes a real or imaginary scene, event, interaction, memory, form, adding a personal reflection on the meaning of the item or incident, thought, feeling, emotion, or situation in his or her life. It is also a way of thinking where one tries to analyze the event and explore experiences that lead to new understanding of this event.

Reflective writing is the visual representation of one's reflective thinking and a mental processing of one's internal problem solving

activity. Reflective writing, unlike other writing kinds, is more open ended, questioning and exploratory, raising rather than answering questions, and enabling exploration of connections between ideas encountered in the course and the writer's experience (Crème 2005).

Reflective protocol is a tool used to assist a teacher in reflecting on his or her lesson. A coach chooses observing and giving feedback when teachers have implemented new practices within their own classroom. Reflective protocol is a way to discover and to develop the students' ability to think for themselves. It is also an "*instrument*" to assess whether student have learned what they are supposed to.

It consists of one or few pages of freely written text related to something the students have read as a part of their studies. Accordingly, writing a "*reflective protocol*" is not a summary not a review, not even an analysis of a text. Instead it is about writing down thoughts and questions that come up as a result of the reading.

It has four components:

- Video capture □ reflect on video of a lesson 'or segments of lessons determined by the teacher.
- Student performance □ reflect on student progress toward academic goals.

- Traditional observation □ reflect on information collected from at least one unannounced evaluator - conducted classroom observation.
- Student voice □ reflect on feedback from students either through student survey or focus group.

Moreover, reflective writing focuses on the writer's learning experience itself and attempts to identify the significance and meaning of a given learning experience, primarily for the writer (Fink, 2003). It provides opportunities to integrate student thoughts and experiences with academic content. Reflective writers examine their interactions among colleagues and clients, identify gaps in knowledge, acknowledge mistakes, and process difficult situation. The aim is to develop self-awareness and foster thinking modes (Kuiper & Pesut, 2004).

The act of reflective writing compels the writer to examine, clarify, and crystalize thoughts and ideas that might otherwise be floating around the mind in disconnected fragments (Jones & Shetton 2006).

The importance of reflective writing is noted by several studies. Tang (2002) argued that reflection and critical thinking are enhanced through writing. Reflective writing has been shown to promote reflection among pre-service and in-service teachers concerning the

use of classroom material, interaction with students, and attitudes towards teaching (Beed *et al.*, 2005). In addition Hiemstra (2001) listed a number of potential benefits of keeping reflective written records, such as increased ability of self-expression, self-discovery and reduced stress. Furthermore, reflective writing offers students opportunities to communicate with their instructors with confidence and motivation. On the contrary "students can have a role to evaluate themselves and monitor their progress.

The use of reflective writing protocol enables to acquire good writing skills. It makes students creative and more open-minded. They find reflective protocol an exciting way to explore something about reality. It is a way of understanding how different individuals perceive a given text and how a student interprets a text.

Reflective writing has the potential to promote critical thinking, Priest and Surges (2005) suggests that "reflection provides an invaluable experience as it helps the individuals to subject their personal beliefs to critical analysis in a safe environment" (p.2).

In addition, it encourages students to keep an invaluable record for their thoughts, feelings, experiences, personal values and beliefs. Furthermore, reflective writing offers students opportunities to communicate with their instructors with confidence and motivation as there is no anxiety related to assessment or grading (Park, 2003).

Reflective writing is an effective learning technique that enables students to learn while they are writing. According to Graham (2003) reflective writing helps students develop confidence, competence in their writing and perceive themselves as writers. It can offer means to enlighten learners thinking habits, and to engage with their instructors in meaningful dialogue where both can, examine their thinking patterns and reflect on them.

2.Context of the problem:

Several studies on writing revealed that there are many problems in teaching writing for both teachers and students. (e.g. Al Shumaimeri, 2011; Al-Sobh & Al-Haq, 2021; Chelli, 2012; Chou, 2022; Zahran, 2013). Equally important is that many EFL students lack critical thinking.

Throughout the researcher's experience as a teacher of English, she noticed that students are weak in writing performance, and they need to improve their writing performance. They face difficulties in producing good ideas arranged logically, using suitable vocabulary items and correct structures. They lack confidence to write in the foreign language. They some students did not have the ability to write even simple paragraph on a given topic.

The researcher conducted an exploratory study in 2020 using a writing performance test which was administered to a sample of students (N=25) selected randomly first year experimental language secondary school students. The writing test consisted of 3 questions to assess students writing performance in content, organization, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics. For the form of the test.

See Appendix (1):

Table (1): The results of EFL writing performance test:

| Writing Performance Skills | | Ss. Number | Percentage of Error |
|----------------------------|---|------------|---------------------|
| A. Content | 1- Mention relevant supporting details clearly. | 19 | 76% |
| B. Organisation | 2- Write a cohesive and coherent paragraph. | 20 | 80% |
| C. Grammar | 3- Apply correct sentence structure. | 19 | 76% |
| | 4- Use grammatical rules correctly. | 18 | 72% |
| D. Vocabulary | 5- Use correct word form. | 16 | 64% |
| E. Mechanics | 6- Apply capitalization rules. | 17 | 68% |
| | 7-Using punctuation marks appropriately. | 20 | 80% |

The results of the writing test revealed that the students had problems in the previous writing performance skills.

3. Statement of the problem:

The problem of the present study could be stated in the low level of the first year experimental secondary school students in writing performance and critical thinking. Therefore, the current study could be considered as an attempt to develop the necessary writing performance skills and critical thinking for the first year secondary stage students. Accordingly, the study problem could be precisely stated in the following main question: **"What is the effect of a reflective writing protocol on developing the secondary stage students' writing performance and critical thinking ?**

This question was sub-divided in to the following sub questions:

- 1- What are the EFL writing performance skills required for secondary school students ?**
- 2- What are the critical thinking skills required for first year secondary school students ?**
- 3- What is the actual level of the first year experimental secondary school students' writing ?**
- 4- What is the first year experimental secondary school students' critical thinking ?**
- 5- How can reflective writing protocol be implemented in the first year secondary school writing classes ?**

6- What is the effect of a reflective writing protocol on developing the first year experimental secondary school a students' writing performance ?

7- What is the effect of a reflective writing protocol on enhancing the first year experimental secondary school students' critical thinking ?

4. The study variables:

1.4.a. The independent variable:

The reflective writing protocol.

1.4.b. The independent variables:

- The first year experimental secondary stage students' EFL writing performance.
- The first year experimental secondary stage students' EFL critical thinking.

5. Aim of the study:

The study aimed at investigating the effect of reflective writing protocol on developing the 1st year secondary school students' EFL writing performance and critical thinking.

6. Significance of the study:

Significance of the study lied in what it offered to the following groups:

- To the 1st year secondary school students.
- Developing their EFL writing performance.
- Developing their EFL critical thinking.

b- EFL teachers:

- Drawing their attention to the importance of reflective writing protocol in developing their students' EFL writing performance and critical thinking.
- Providing practical procedures for implementing the reflective writing protocol for enhancing their students' writing performance and critical thinking.

c- Curriculum Designers:

- Providing them with guidelines to adopt the reflective writing protocol in designing English curricula.

7. Delimitations of the study:

The present study was delimited to the following:

- a. Fifty students of the 1st year experimental secondary school students.
- b. Treatment Delimitations: measuring the effect of a protocol based on reflective writing on developing EFL writing

performance and critical thinking of the 1st year experimental secondary school students.

- c. Place Delimitations: Omar El-Farouk experimental secondary school, Zagazig, Sharkia.
- d. Time delimitations: the second term of the school year 2021/2022.

8. Instruments if the study:

To achieve the purpose of the study, the following instruments were developed.

- a. An EFL writing performance pre-posttest.
- b. A critical thinking scale.
- c. Rubric for scoring the students' writing performance.

9. Material of the study:

A suggested protocol based on reflective writing.

10. Design of the study:

A quasi-experimental design by dividing the participants into two groups: experimental and control group.

11. Procedures of the study:

To answer the questions of the study, the following procedures were adopted:

- Reviewing relevant literature and previous studies which were closely related to writing performance and critical thinking to determine the skills needed for this stage.
- Reviewing relevant literature and previous studies related to reflective writing protocol to design the experiment.
- Specifying the writing performance skills suitable for the first year experimental secondary school students through a questionnaire for teachers, supervisors, and EFL methodology specialists.
- Constructing a pre-posttest for measuring students' writing performance and submitting it to a jury of specialists to determine its validity.
- Designing a pre-post scale to measure students' critical thinking and submitting it to a jury of specialists to determine its validity.
- Selecting randomly the participants of the study from Omar El-Farouk experimental secondary school student. Students were divided into (*the experimental and control groups*).

- Conducting the pre-writing performance test for the two groups.
- Administering the pre-critical thinking scale to the two groups.
- Teaching the experimental group through the reflective writing protocol. However, the control group was taught using the regular way of teaching.
- Administering the writing performance posttest and the post-critical thinking scale to the two groups.
- Comparing the results of the two groups on the pre-posttest and pre-post scale.
- Using the suitable statistical methods for assessing the effectiveness of using reflective writing protocol in developing students' writing performance and critical thinking.
- Providing discussion and interpretation of the results.
- Presenting a number of conclusions, recommendations and suggestions for further research.

12. Definition of Terms:

12.1. Writing Performance:

Hussein (2015) defines writing performance as the act or process of carrying out writing tasks. It describes what students actually do concerning writing tasks, in terms of content, organisation, vocabulary, grammar and mechanics.

Nunan (2003:88) defines writing as an intellectual activity of finding ideas and thinking about the way of expressing and arranging them into a phrase and paragraph that can be understood by peop.

Abu Naba'h (2013, P. 38) defined writing performance as expressing oneself on a certain topic through the written word with good quality and enough quantity.

Out of these definitions, the researcher defined writing performance as a process in which first year secondary school students can produce ideas and express these ideas in writing in English, in terms of organisation, content, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics.

12.2. Critical Thinking:

Brown and Keeley (2007) defined critical thinking as an awareness of a group of connected questions, an ability to ask and answer critical questions at suitable time and desire to actively use the critical questions.

Critical thinking, according to the (National Council for Excellence in critical thinking, 2013), is the intellectually rigorous process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and / or evaluating (assessing) information gathered from, or produced by, observation, experience, reflection, communication, or reasoning, as a guide to belief and action.

According to fisher (2001), critical thinking is "skilled and active interpretation and evaluation of observation and communications information and argumentation.

The researcher could operationally define critical thinking as the first year secondary school students' ability to interpret, analyze, assess, infer and explain information, develop lines of argument and make judgment.

12.3. Reflective Writing:

Crème (2005) defined reflective writing as the visual representation of one's internal problem-solving activity. It is more open-ended, questioning and exploratory, raising rather than answering questions, and enabling exploration.

Williams, K., Woolliams, M., Spiro, J. (2012) defined reflective writing as a chance to demonstrate how writers have gained experience and skills, or developed their practice by analyzing

specific events and actions they have been part of and using these to demonstrate that they are aware of their personal development.

A protocol is a group of organized steps which the learner can produce either orally in a written form.

According to the concise oxford dictionary (1991). Protocol is the rules, formalities of any procedure and as a formal statement.

A reflective writing protocol is a reflective organization of ideas through writing.

13. Design of the study:

This study was a quasi-experimental research. It followed the pre/posttest and control and experimental group design. So two classes were chosen to represent the experimental and control groups. Furthermore, the experimental group was taught using the reflective writing protocol for improving their writing performance and critical thinking. On the other side, the control group received regular instruction.

14. Participants of the Study:

The participants of the study included 50 first year experimental language secondary stage students. They were randomly selected from one of Sharkeya secondary experimental language schools namely Omar El-Farouk Experimental language secondary school in Zagazig city during the school year 2021/2022. The experimental

group included 25 students (Fifteen girls and ten boys), while the control group included 25 students (*fifteen girls and ten boys*). A writing performance test and a critical thinking scale were given to the two groups before and after administering the protocol proposed.

15. Study Material

The following is a description of the stars that the researcher has followed to design the course based on using the reflective writing protocol for the participants.

The reflective writing protocol:

a. Aims:

The main aim of using reflective writing protocol was to develop the EFI first year secondary school students' writing performance and critical thinking. By the end of the course students should be able to:

A. Content:

1- Develop some of writing performance skills which can be shown as follows:

1. Set the main idea clearly.
2. Mention relevant supporting details clearly.
3. Provide enough examples to make ideas understood.

B. Organisation:

4. Identify the topic sentence clearly.
5. Determine conclusion of the subject properly.
6. Mention the beginning, middle and end of a paragraph suitably.
7. Write the true form of paragraphs, post cards and emails.
8. Write a cohesive and coherent paragraph.
9. Use logical transitions for logical sequence of sentences.

C. Grammar

10. Use grammatical rules correctly.
11. Apply correct sentence structure.
12. Use different tenses properly.

D. Vocabulary use (Choice).

13. Use correct word form.
14. Use appropriate words that convey meaning clearly.
15. Void redundancy of using words.

E. Mechanics

16. Apply capitalization rules correctly.
17. Use punctuation marks appropriately.

18. Leave equal space between words.

2- Develop some critical thinking skills which can be shown as follows:

A. Interpretation:

1. Categorize the advantages and disadvantages of data.
2. Decode significance of data.
3. Clarify significance of data.

B. Analysis:

4. Recognize hidden meaning.
5. Identify the problems expressed in the text, and find different solutions for them.
6. Distinguish between fact from belief.
7. Analyse the problem into manageable parts.

C. Evaluation:

8. Assess claims of writer.
9. Construct relationships between data to get new solutions.
10. Assess arguments.
11. Assess logical strength of the actual relationships among statements or descriptions.

D. Inference:

12. Conjecture alternatives of the topic.
13. Draw conclusions of the essay.
14. Use appropriate words that convey meaning clearly.

Description:

The researcher designed ten sessions depending on using the structure of reflective writing protocol to develop the EFI first-year secondary school students besides two sessions for the pre post-test and one session (orientation session) to introduce the main objectives and steps of the protocol to the students. Each session in the whole sessions revolved around a main topic and aimed to develop specific levels of writing performance and critical thinking.

Each session consisted of the main objectives, teaching method, teaching aids (material needed), and procedures. At the end of each session, there were some activities that measured the students' writing performance and critical thinking levels gradually. By reaching the final session, the structure of writing performance and

critical thinking would be the best performance than in session one.

Content:

- The content of the reflective writing protocol:

The content of the reflective writing protocol was adopted from the advanced book (summit) and teachers' guide for the first year secondary school. The researcher made use of the student. The researcher depended on unit 4 "Looking good and six" Advertising and customers". Each unit consisted of 4 lessons. The lessons contained writing and critical thinking tasks. The researcher depended on those activities in constructing the sessions of the protocol.

The Precautions:

For achieving the main aims of the study, some principles were taken into consideration:

- Providing students with introductory time about how to try to improve their writing performance for helping them to write and think later on. The time was essential to give them the important information about the session which was needed to teach them how to improve their writing performance and critical thinking by using the reflective writing protocol.
- Some activities and tasks were prepared to address the intended writing performance and critical thinking skills and

- to consider the students' academic levels and their individual differences.
- Supporting co-operation to do the tasks by dividing students into groups.
 - By using the reflective writing protocol, the students had an active role in doing the tasks and in giving their reflections on their responses. In addition, the researcher was a guide, observer, and facilitator in the course and in the pre post-test.

Duration and administration:

The writing performance test and critical thinking scale were pre administered to the participants for both (experimental and controls groups in February 2022. The first session started in March. The sessions lasted for ten weeks for the experimental group (months March and April).

Teaching the writing performance and critical thinking lasted for ten sessions 270 minutes for each to the experimental group: The experiment ended in May followed by administering the writing performance post-test and critical thinking scale.

Applicability of the protocol:

To ensure the appropriateness and suitability year secondary stage. Students, the resubmitted number of EFI specialists and

experts who generally approved the protocol but some modifications were suggested on the basis of which the researcher prepared the final form of the protocol sessions.

Procedures of the experimentation:

The experiment was conducted as follows:

- 1- The reflective writing protocol sessions were designed.
- 2- The first year secondary students were divided into two groups: the treatment group and non-treatment group.
- 3- Pre-test and scale were administered to the two groups at the second term of the school year 2021/2022 and before administration the suggested protocol for developing the treatment group participants' writing performance and critical thinking.
- 4- The treatment group was taught writing and critical thinking through using the reflective writing protocol. Ten sessions were administered.

Each session lasted for 70 minutes. The procedures of each session were as follows:

- Objectives.
- Teaching Method.

- Teaching aids.
- Duration.
- Procedures of teaching which involved the roles of the teacher and students (the steps of the protocol). The procedures contain three stages:
 - a. Pre-writing stage.
 - b. During writing.
 - c. Post writing. See Appendix (2)
- 5- The non-treatment group was taught using regular instruction.
- 6- Finally, the post-test and the scale were administered to both groups.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, Z., & Karanajaran, T. (2013).** Teaching writing: An analysis if the writing tasks used at East West University in Bangkadesh Language in India, 13 (3). 103-117.
- Beed, P., Rideway, V., Bronline, F., Kalnina, S. (2005).** The power of reflective writing for students and teachers. In

reading, writing thinking, procedir of the 13th European conference on reading Retrieved from:

www.reading.prg/downloads/publications/books/bk594-23-Beed-pdf.

Beers, K. (2003). when Kids Can't read, what teachers can do: A guide for teachers & to 12. Portsmouth, N H: Heinemann.

Crème, P. (2005). Should student learning journals be Assessed ? Assessment and Evaluation in higher education, 30(3), 287-296.

Fink, D. (2004). Creating significant learning experiences across the curriculum workshop presentation at the NEFDc 2004 fall conference westford. Massachusetts.

Graham, L. (2003). Writing journals: An investigation reading., 37(1), 39-42. Retrived April 15, 2014, from:
<http://web-ebsohost.com.prooxy.ohilink.edu>

Nunan, D. (2003). Practical English language teaching. Contemporary. McGeaw Hill companies. Inc.

Keeley, S. & Brown, M. (2007). Asking the right questions a guide to critical thinking. Pearson, prentice Hall.

Paul, R.& Elder, L. (2009). The miniature guide to critical thinking. Concepts and tools. (thinker's guide). Dillon Beach, CA: Foundation for critical thinking.

Tanf permoon, T. (2008). Integrated Approaches to Improve the writing skills of English major students. ABAC Journal, 28(2), May-August, 1-9.

Wu, H. (2015). The effects of blog-supported collaborative writing on writing on writing performance, writing anxiety and perceptions of EFL college students in Taiwan (Doctoral dissertation, the college of Education, University of forth Florida, Florida, the United States).

Revived From:

<http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/5600>

Xiao-xia, Q, (2007). Raising learners awareness of readership in their EFL writing Us-china Foreign language, 5(12), 31-36.