

JOURNAL OF Educational & Psychological Sciences

The Effect of Using Reflective Journals on the Writing Achievement and the Writing Attitudes of Eighth Grade EFL Jordanian Students

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the effect of using reflective journals on the writing achievement and writing attitudes of eighth grade EFL students in Jordan.

The sample of the study consisted of two eighth grade student sections at the Educational Creativity Schools in Amman. One of the two sections was purposely assigned as the control group (18 students) and the second section was assigned as the experimental group (18 students).

The research instruments used to achieve the purposes of this study were: A writing attitude questionnaire and a writing achievement test with the scoring scale. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations, in addition to the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). The main results of the study indicated that the mean scores of the experimental group was significantly higher than the mean scores of the control group in the writing achievement and writing attitudes after eight weeks of treatment. This means that the use of reflective journals had significantly greater positive effect on the eighth -grade EFL students' writing achievement and writing attitudes than the effect of using the traditional methods.

Key words: authentic assessment, reflective journals, writing attitudes.

أثر استخدام مذكرات الكتابة في التحصيل الكتابي واتجاهات طلبة الصف الثامن الأساسي في الأردن نحو الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية

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الملخص

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى التعرف على أثر استخدام مذكرات كتابات طلبة الصف الثامن في تحصيلهم واتجاهاتهم نحو الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية. تكونت عينة الدراسة من شعبتين من طلبة الصف الثامن في مدارس الإبداع التربوي-عمّان. شكلت إحدى الشعبتين المجموعة الضابطة (١٨ طالباً)، والمجموعة الأخرى المجموعة التجريبية (١٨ طالباً). تم استخدام أداتي دراسة لجمع البيانات هما: استبيانه لقياس الاتجاهات نحو الكتابة واختبار في التحصيل الكتابي مع مقياس التصحيح. تم تحليل البيانات باستخدام مقاييس الإحصاء الوصفي مثل المتوسطات الحسابية والانحرافات المعيارية بالإضافة إلى تحليل التباين المصاحب (ANCOVA) لمعرفة ما إذا كانت هناك أية فروق دالة إحصائياً بين المتوسطات للطلاب في كلتا المجموعتين عند مستوى الدلالة ($\alpha \geq 0.05$). أظهرت نتائج الدراسة فروقاً ذات دلالة إحصائية لصالح المجموعة التجريبية التي درست باستخدام مذكرات الكتابة. وقد أوصت الدراسة بإجراء المزيد من الدراسات للتعقب في دراسة أثر استخدام مذكرات الكتابة في تحصيل الطلبة واتجاهاتهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ملفات الكتابة، التحصيل الكتابي، الاتجاهات نحو الكتابة.

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Introduction

Writing is not only a matter of writing words or sentences, but it is also a means of communicating ideas to people. Writing is similar to other language skills such as speaking in that they depend on situation, task, audience and function. Good writing requires time, clarity of expressions, and a lot of revision and improvement. Conley (1995) believes that writing makes our thoughts and experiences vivid and long lasting. Also it helps us learn things in every subject area .In many ways, writing is the way we make sense of our world. However, research on writing assessment indicates that the focus has recently shifted from grammatical accuracy to the communicative and interactive fluency.

Murray (1985), Killingworth (1993), and Glazer (1994), for instance, argued that when grading composition, teachers should go beyond focusing on the mechanics of writing to focusing on organization and manipulation of ideas, provision of sound content, and creativity of the writer. Batayneh (1986) examined the practicality of contrastive text and discourse analysis in the field of teaching and evaluating writing with reference to the Jordanian context .Results showed that students lack the ability to write effectively in English. It was found that writing skills were directed, if not ignored, towards spelling and grammar. He suggested that language should be presented and evaluated in such a way that it reflects the communicative sense.

Zamel (1983) also considered the role of the teacher of writing is to help students develop viable strategies for finding topics, generating ideas and information, focusing and planning structure and procedure. Also, they argued that prewriting techniques encourage students to overcome their

fear and their preoccupation with correctness. To help students become competent writers, the teacher should be a supervisor, enabler and leader.

Ferris (1995) conducted a study to check students' reactions to teacher response in multiple – draft composition classroom .One hundred and fifty – five students were involved in the study, Results indicated that students paid more attention to teacher feedback on preliminary drafts compared to final drafts. They utilized a variety of strategies to respond to their teachers' comments. They appreciated receiving comments of encouragement and they find their teachers' feedback useful in helping them to improve their writing. Ferris suggested that teachers should be more intentional in explaining their responding behaviors to their students.

Accordingly, Richards (1996) adds that writing is regarded as an enormously complex skill, and students should be given the opportunity to approach written composition as a communicative activity including informing, requesting, expressing personal opinion and recording events. Learning to write in either a first or a second language is a difficult and lengthy process that usually induces anxiety and frustration in many learners. This could be due to traditional practices and evaluation methods used in teaching and evaluating writing.

For example, Hawari (1996) conducted a study to describe and analyze the procedures Jordanian EFL teachers focus on when they evaluate their students' compositions. The findings of the study revealed that teachers were mainly concerned with the correctness of the structures and the mechanics of writing, perhaps at the expense of rhetorical aspects such as organization, coherence and cohesion. The findings also indicated that teachers did not usually provide adequate feedback concerning the students' flaws and errors. The researcher recommended that teachers should emphasize both the grammatical elements and discourse aspects of writing as they teach and evaluate students.

Writing has been practiced by teachers for many years, but the purposes, functions and techniques of teaching writing have gradually been modified and improved. Through research, they have been developed and refined new techniques and methods for the measurements of attitudes, interests, critical thinking and personal –social adaptability. Reflective Journals are one of the alternative assessment methods suggested for purposes of effective

language teaching and learning (Brown, 1987; Firris, 1995 & Darayseh, 2003).

Reflective Journals are written conversations between students and teachers. They provide opportunities for students to provide feedback about their learning experiences. The primary use of reflective journal is in the collection of information about students' backgrounds and about teaching and learning processes: for example, information about student's goals or expectations about second language learning; their feelings or attitudes about themselves, the classroom, and other instructional matters; their work habits, interests, and preferences (Powell, 1985 & Bailey, 1990).

Carter (1997) examined the use of journals to promote reflection. The purpose of his research with teacher education students was to explore the value of writing reflective journals. Data came from interviews, surveys, and informal conversations with students in an educational psychology course. Analysis of the data revealed that students enjoyed writing the journals and believed overwhelmingly that writing the journals increased the overall value of the course.

Because of their personal, student-centered nature, reflective journals have added an advantage that they give students opportunities to express themselves personally about their interests, goals, and desires using the second language. Reflective Journals can also provide teachers with opportunities to assess their students' ability to express themselves personally in writing using the second language without the pressures that students may feel during whole class activities. Sluys (2006) conducted a study to examine how children in a first-through third-grade and a fourth-through sixth-grade classroom used written conversations as a communicative forum to explore writing and their surrounding social worlds. Results showed that written conversations invite students to talk about what they know and to inquire about what they do not know. They also give writers reason to shape their texts in ways their readers will understand.

Statement of the Problem

Reflective journals provide useful information for individualizing instruction, increase opportunities for functional communication between students and teachers, give students opportunities to use language for

genuine communication and promote the development of certain writing skills and enhance students' involvement in and ownership of learning (Brown, 1987; Firris, 1995 & Darayseh, 2003). However, the researchers have noticed that students' grades in writing are low, which could be the reason why some of them dislike writing. The researchers have also noticed that the teaching of writing is exclusive to traditional teaching. Hawari (1996), Bani Younis (1997), and Abu-Jaleel (2001), for example, argued that mechanics of writing have precedence over other writing components. Moreover, most teachers do not practice teaching reflective journal to their students. This could be another reason why students are not good at writing or that they don't like to write in English. Therefore, this study was an attempt to investigate the effect of using reflective journals on the writing achievement and writing attitudes of eighth grade EFL students in Jordan toward writing in English.

Purpose and Questions of the Study

This study aimed at investigating the effect of using reflective journals on the writing achievement and writing attitudes of eighth grade EFL students in Jordan toward writing in English. More specifically, the study aims at answering the following two questions:

1. Are there any statistically significant differences ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) in the writing achievement mean scores of eighth- grade EFL Jordanian students that can be attributed to the teaching method (i.e. Using reflective journals or traditional method)?
2. Are there any statistically significant differences ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) in the writing attitudes mean scores of eighth - grade EFL Jordanian students that can be attributed to the teaching method (reflective journals or the traditional method)?

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study were expected to highlight the importance of using reflective journals to eighth grade EFL students in Jordan so that they develop their willingness to write more often and more communicatively. Therefore, the researchers hope that the results of the present study will give EFL teachers in Jordan more insights into the importance of using authentic

assessment tools, such as reflective journals in teaching and assessing their students. Curricula planners may also find the results of this study important to reconsider the procedures of teaching writing to EFL Jordanian students which are suggested in the teachers' books. Finally, the findings of this study may empower other EFL researchers to investigate other aspects of reflective journals or other techniques of authentic assessment.

Limitations of the Study

1. This study was conducted on eighth grade EFL Jordanian students in Educational Creativity Schools. Therefore, the generalizability of the results of this study is applicable to similar populations only.
2. The treatment lasted for eight weeks. Therefore, if the treatment had lasted for longer time, it could have yielded better results in students writing achievement.

The sample size (36 students) is relatively small. This is mainly because of the extensive analysis of students' written work in their reflective journals.

Methods and Procedures

Design of the Study

This was a quasi- experimental study which had one independent variable (the use of reflective journals) and two dependent variables the writing achievement mean scores and the writing attitudes mean scores of eighth EFL grade students in Jordan.

Population and Sample

The population of the study consisted of the EFL eighth grade students in Amman Directorate of Education in the academic year 2007 - 2008. The sample of the study consisted of two mixed eighth grade student sections at the Educational Creativity Schools in Amman chosen purposefully. One of the two sections was assigned as the control group (18 students) and the second section was assigned as the experimental group (18 students).

Research Instruments

The research instruments used to achieve the objectives of this study were:

- 1- Writing Attitude Questionnaire .This instrument was developed by the researchers to investigate the students' attitudes towards writing in English.

The questionnaire contained thirty items that were intended to elicit the subjects' opinions on a five – point Likert scale (i.e. strongly agree 5, agree 4, neutral 3, disagree 2, strongly disagree 1).

The questionnaire included three parts: part one consisted of 9 items aiming at exploring students' opinions about writing in English. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of 10 items aiming at exploring students' beliefs about writing in English. The third part consisted of 11 items which aimed at exploring writing practices in English. Students were asked to choose the answer which mostly represented their attitudes, beliefs and practices in writing English.

2- Writing Achievement Test: Students were asked to write on the advantages of using computers nowadays before the treatment (pre-test) and they were asked to write about the same topic again after the treatment as a post - test. To score those two tests the researchers developed a writing scoring scale based on related literature such as Radice (1986); Cohen (1994); and Rameriz (1995). This scale covered five areas (grammar, mechanics of writing, cohesion, vocabulary and content). A score was assigned to each writing area and the sum of these sub- scores compromised the total score for each student on both writing tests (the pre - test and the post - test).

Validity of the Writing Attitudes Questionnaire

To validate the writing attitude questionnaire, it was given to a jury of five EFL university professors, three supervisors, and two experienced teachers. The experts' comments and suggestions included: deleting overlapping items, splitting the questionnaire into three parts which included students' opinions, beliefs and practices in writing English, making some editing corrections and translating the items into Arabic for students. The questionnaire was finally modified as suggested resulting in a thirty item questionnaire, which was later approved by all the ten experts.

Validity of the Writing Scoring Scale

To validate the writing scoring scale, the researcher gave it to the same jury of EFL experts who validated the writing attitude questionnaire. They suggested weights for the writing scale.

Reliability of the Writing Attitudes Questionnaire

To establish reliability for the writing attitude questionnaire, the following steps were used:

- The questionnaire was tried out on (22) tenth- grade EFL students who were excluded from the sample of the study later on.
- After two weeks, the researcher applied the same questionnaire to the same group of students.
- The reliability of the writing attitude questionnaire was established by using the test-retest method .The computed value was 0.95.This value was considered satisfactory to apply it to the sample of the study later on.

Reliability of Raters

- Interreliability of raters: the researchers and another experienced rater used the writing achievement scale to evaluate students' writings. First, ten samples of students papers were chosen randomly and were corrected by each of the two raters independently. Each rater read each piece of writing and suggested a grade .Inerraters' reliability was estimated by comparing the scores given to each student on his written piece by each of the two raters (the researcher herself and another teacher). The percentage of raters' agreement on each paper was more than 90% which was considered appropriate to correct the papers of the sample of the study later on.
- Intrareliability of the rater: A sample of students papers (10 papers) were corrected by the researchers themselves according to the writing achievement scale. The researchers corrected the same papers after two weeks. The percentage of interrater reliability on each paper was more than 95% .This was considered appropriate to analyze the data of the study.

Data Collection

The researcher took permission from the Educational Creativity Schools to conduct the study. A writing attitude questionnaire was developed by the researcher based on the related literature. The researcher developed a writing Achievement scale to grade students writing achievement. The researcher developed a teaching method for teaching reflective journals compared to traditional teaching of writing. A pre-test of writing achievement and a questionnaire for writing attitudes were applied before starting the study.

All the research instruments and the teaching methods were validated by a group of ten EFL experts. Reliability of the writing attitude questionnaire, intrareliability and interreliability of raters were established prior to using those instruments to collect the data of the study. The treatment lasted for eight weeks. At the end of the experiment, both groups were given a post test and the questionnaire of writing attitudes. Students' scores on the posttests were compared with their pretest scores for the sake of analysis.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as means and standard deviations. In addition, analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to find out if the differences in the mean scores of students in both groups were statistically significant ($\alpha \leq .05$) or not.

Results of the Study

1. Results related to the first question: "Are there any statistically significant differences at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) in the writing achievement mean scores of tenth grade EFL Jordanian students that can be attributed to the teaching method (i.e. Using reflective journals or traditional method)?

To answer this question, adjusted mean scores and standard errors were calculated for both groups. Results are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1
Adjusted Mean Scores and Standard Errors of Students in both Groups with Regard to their Writing Achievement in English**

Group	Adjusted Mean	Std.Error
1. Control	5.45	.125
2. Experiment	7.05	.152

Table 1 shows that the adjusted mean score of the students in the control group with regard to writing achievement was 5.45 out of 10, while the adjusted mean score of students in the experimental group was 7.05 out of 10. Again, this indicates that students in the experimental group improved better than students in the control group with regard to writing achievement. Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to find out if the differences in the mean scores of students in both groups were statistically significant at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$). Results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
**Analysis of Covariance in the Writing Achievement Mean Scores
of Students in both Groups**

Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Group	18.90	1	18.90		
Error	12.36	33	0.37		
Corrected Total	1521.00	36		50.47	*0.00

As shown from Table 2, there was a statistically significant difference at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) in the writing achievement mean scores of both groups. This difference was in favor of the students in the experimental group. This means that reflective journals significantly improved the writing achievement of eighth grade EFL students in the experimental group.

2. Results related to the second question: "Are there any statistically significant differences at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) in the writing attitudes mean scores of eighth - grade EFL Jordanian students that can be attributed to the teaching method (reflective journals or the traditional method)?

To answer this question, the adjusted mean scores and standard errors were calculated for both groups. Results are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3
**Adjusted Mean Scores and Standard Errors of Students in both
Groups with Regard to their Attitudes Towards Writing in English**

Group	Adjusted Mean	Std. Error
1. Control	90.33	1.42
2. Experimental	98.56	1.42

Table 3 shows that the adjusted mean score of students in the control group with regard to writing attitudes towards writing in English was 90.33 out of 150 while the adjusted mean score of students in the experimental group was 98.56. This also indicates that students in the experimental group developed more positive attitudes toward writing in English compared to their counterparts in the control group. Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to see if those differences were statistically significant at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$). Results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4
**Analysis of Covariance in the Writing Attitudes of
 Students in both Groups**

Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Group	603.58	1	603.58		
Error	1207.40	33	36.59		
Corrected Total	324074.00	36		36	*0.00

Table 4 shows that there were statistically significant differences ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) in students' attitudes toward writing in English due to using reflective journals. This means reflective journals significantly improved the writing attitudes of the students in the experimental group.

Discussion of Results

Results showed that reflective journals significantly improved the writing achievement of eighth grade EFL students in the experiment group. One reason for this could be that student in the experiment group chose the topics they wrote instead of writing for the teacher or writing for a test. Another reason for this improvement could be that students in the experiment group were given the chance to share and reflect on each other writing. Students could have learned from one another and teach one another. This was evident from some of students' comments on this new experience: "I liked this way in teaching and learning writing because we were treated as real writers who have the chance to talk and express ourselves freely; "We had the chance to listen to other views and ideas. So, we learned to modify our writing". "It's fun, we could talk about our writings and I liked giving feedback on each piece of paper. This result is consistent with the results of many other studies like Carter (1997), and Garcia (2002). Those results supported the importance of using reflective journals in EFL classrooms.

The results also showed that students who used reflective journals scored significantly higher than those who did not use journals. One possible reason for this could be that students were not writing under the pressure of time, and so they wrote comfortably. They might also have found writing about more relevant themes to their personal lives such as writing about music, movies, dreams, ambitions and relationships between parents and their children more rewarding than writing about traditional themes such

as writing about historical places and letters. This was clear from students' reflections about why they liked reflective journals.

These results were similar to those of other researchers like Krol (1996), Brock (1991), and Powell (1990), who found out that student' positive attitudes were directly related to using reflective journals. On the other hand, results showed that the degree of improvement in students' attitudes towards writing in English was significantly higher than the degree of their improvement in writing achievement (2 and 5). One possible reason for this could be that writing requires the writer to pay attention to many aspects compared to personal attitudes. These aspects include- but not excluded to- organization, coherence, cohesion, diction, structure, spelling, and punctuation. In other words, writing skills usually require more time to be mastered and they are less likely to change over time compared to attitudes.

It can be concluded from the results of this study that giving students the chance to write to different people on different occasions for different purposes with the help of the teacher, empowered them to keep their written pieces in a reflective journal. This, in turn, helped students become more responsible of their own writing.

It can also be concluded that students celebrated their writing and developed a great liking for negotiating ideas, commenting on each other's papers, sharing ideas, and reflecting positively on one another's work. As a result, this resulted in creating a safe, supportive, and encouraging writing environment.

Recommendations

Based on the abovementioned results, the researcher recommends the following:

1. Teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) should practice and encourage their students to practice reflective journals.
2. The Ministry of Education should emphasize reflective journals not only in the Teacher's Book, but also in supervising teachers and in authentic assessment. Therefore, there may be a need for more workshops for teachers on how to use reflective journals more effectively.
3. Other researchers need to investigate other related variables in teaching

writing, such as authentic writing assessment, writing ownership, and communicative writing.

4. Other researchers need to study the differences between traditional assessment based on tests and reflective journal assessment to investigate the writing achievement and writing attitudes of EFL students.

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