

# Delving into the Depth: Exploring the Role of Reflective Journaling on L2 Saudi Students' Academic Writing Practices

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## Abstract

Reflective journaling has been acknowledged as a valuable tool for fostering active learning among students. Many studies have examined its effects on second language (L2) students' skills. However, a limited number of studies have investigated its impact on L2 undergraduate students' writing practices, particularly in the Saudi context. Additionally, the exploration of L2 students' perceptions of reflective journaling in academic writing has received scant attention. Therefore, this study aimed to explore how reflective journals contribute to developing L2 Saudi students' academic writing and their perceptions about using reflective journals in writing. A qualitative research approach was employed to collect data from 13 female Saudi students enrolled in an academic writing course at a public Saudi university. The primary data sources for the study were reflective journal entries and semi-structured interviews. The qualitative content analysis of the collected data revealed that most students found reflective journaling helpful for their writing practices. Specifically, it assisted them in exploring the complexity of academic writing, monitoring their writing practices to refine their skills, and cultivating an academic writer identity. However, students reported that they faced challenges while writing reflective journals, which were time-consuming and lacked constant feedback on their journal entries. The study concludes with several recommendations for L2 writing instructors and researchers.

**Keywords:** writing, academic writing, reflective journal, higher education, students, qualitative analysis

## 1. Introduction

Developing effective writing skills is essential for academic success, particularly for second-language (L2) students whose languages differ from the language of instruction. These students often face challenges in mastering academic writing due to the inherent complexity of the writing process. This complexity is not merely a matter of language proficiency; it also involves navigating the multifaceted interplay of social, cognitive, and ecological factors that influence writing (Hyland, 2003). Consequently, cultivating academic writing skills in L2 students requires innovative pedagogical approaches tailored to their specific needs and challenges (Silva & Matsuda, 2012).

Reflective journaling has gained much attention as a promising educational tool, allowing students to deeply engage with their learning experiences (Schön, 1987). These reflective journals, essentially written documents, allow students to record their experiences and perspectives about a specific task. Research suggests that reflective journaling can foster students' cognitive and metacognitive skills, encouraging them to identify their strengths and weaknesses (Hiemstra, 2001; Stevenson & Cooper, 2009). This self-awareness is crucial for increasing students' active engagement in and ownership of their academic work (Moon, 2006). Moreover, reflective journaling can equip students with critical analysis, synthesis, and interpretation skills regarding concepts, situations, or events related to their learning process (Thorpe, 2004). In this sense, reflective journaling is a pivotal tool for enhancing students' writing skills.

However, while prior research has extensively explored reflective journaling in contexts where English is the participants' first language, only a few studies have been conducted in the second language learning field (Casanave, 2011; Rassaei, 2015). Even within the available body of research examining the effects of reflective journaling on different aspects of language learning (Rokni & Seifi, 2013), its specific contributions to L2 students' academic writing development remain underexplored. Particularly, there is a paucity of research focusing on using reflective journals in writing courses for L2 students in Saudi universities. Consequently, this qualitative study contributes to the current scholarly discourse by exploring how reflective journaling could improve the academic writing practices of L2 students in a Saudi university's writing course. Moreover, understanding the L2 students' perceptions of their experiences with reflective journaling can offer valuable insights into the efficacy of this practice.

### 1.1 Research Questions

The research questions guiding this research study are:

- 1) How do reflective journals contribute to the development of L2 students' academic writing practices?
- 2) What are the students' perceptions of using reflective journals in their academic writing?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 What is Reflective Journal Writing?

Over the past years, journal writing has been considered an important activity in various academic contexts. Moon (2006) asserted that journals are a “vehicle of reflection” (p. 4). The term reflection originates from the Latin word ‘reflectere,’ which means ‘bending back’ (Wade & Yarbrough, 1996). Dewey (1933) described reflective thinking as a process that involves “turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive consideration” (P. 3). Reflection, Dewey added, is “the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it” (p. 9). It is important to highlight, according to Dewey’s definitions, that reflection constitutes a dynamic process (Denton, 2009). Elaborating on Dewey’s definition, Hebert (2015) characterized reflection as “focused, careful, and methodological” (p. 363). It is focused since it centers on a specific situation to comprehend the matter at hand; it is careful because it attempts to provide reasoning with evidence for one’s ideas, and it is methodological as it follows a systematic process.

Gustafson and Bennett (2002) asserted that reflection is a process, and time is one of its salient features; thus, they defined reflection as an act of thinking about recent experiences over a period of time, “looking for commonalities, differences, and interrelations beyond their superficial elements” (p.1). For Boyd and Fales (1983), reflection is an internal process where individuals scrutinize matters of interests arising from experiences. This exploration helps them to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their perspectives, ultimately leading to transformed viewpoints. An important characteristic to highlight here is the idea of transformation yielding from the reflection process. Indeed, these definitions are akin to Schön (1987) concept of reflection-in-action, which he conceptualized as an active “thinking that serves to reshape what we are doing while we are doing it” (p. 26), which in turn will affect future experiences and actions.

### 2.2 Reflective Journal Writing in Academic Settings

In educational contexts, reflection, or reflective writing, refers to the students’ ability to observe and evaluate their learning practices to improve their understanding and skills. Journal writing has been recommended as a valuable practice to prompt students’ reflection. Moon (2006) described journal writing as “a vehicle for reflection” (p. 2). Reflective journals, as defined by Thorpe (2004), are “written documents that students create as they think about various concepts, events, or interactions over a period of time for the purposes of gaining insights into self-awareness and learning” (p. 328). This study defines reflective journaling as rhetorical acts wherein students record their thoughts, experiences, and emotions about a particular writing event to explore, negotiate, and establish connections between previous experiences and future possibilities.

A comprehensive examination of the available literature on reflective journaling in various classroom settings revealed the multifaceted benefits that journals offer students. According to Hiemstra (2001), reflective journaling prompts students to analyze and evaluate their learning experience, thus enhancing critical thinking skills, creativity, and metacognition. In addition, Moon (2006) maintained that reflective journaling helps students apply theoretical concepts they learned in the classroom to real-world situations. Through this process of integrating theory into practice, students can identify learning areas that require further development, thereby monitoring and reshaping their academic progress (Allan & Driscoll, 2014). Reflective journaling is perceived as a safe environment to explore inner thoughts and articulate personal values, beliefs, and emotions. As such, reflective journaling enhances students’ self-awareness and increases motivation while helping them to release stress and become more confident (Stevenson & Cooper, 2009; Thorpe, 2004).

### 2.3 Reflective Journaling and Second Language Learning

Recently, journaling has become an increasingly popular activity in the field of L2 learning and teaching. According to Casanave (2011), reflective journaling in the context of language acquisition is “a risk-free, personal, reflective, and responsive writing activity done regularly over time in a style that suits the writer’s personality and proficiency level” (2011, p. 5). Several scholarly works underscored the crucial function of reflective journaling plays in improving the learning experience for L2 students (e.g., Hirose & Sasaki, 2000; Ogawa & Hall, 2011). This line of research asserted that in addition to improving L2 students’ higher-order thinking skills, such as critical reflection (Chau, 2010), reflective journaling motivated L2 students, particularly timid and reluctant ones, to more effectively engage in the language learning process (Ahmed, 2020). Another line of research highlighted the potential effects of reflective journaling on honing specific L2 skills, notably in reading (e.g., Chang & Lin, 2014), listening (e.g., Chen, 2017; Lee & Chan, 2017), grammar (e.g., Puengpipattrakul, 2009; Rokni & Seifi, 2013), and vocabulary (e.g., Laqaei, 2015).

Regarding L2 writing, research has shown that reflective journaling can effectively enhance L2 students’ writing. For instance, Liao and Wong (2010) investigated the effectiveness of reflective journaling on writing fluency, reflections, anxiety, and motivation of L2 students in a Taiwanese high school. The researchers found that reflective journal writing promoted the students’ English writing proficiency, particularly in generating, organizing, and transforming their ideas into higher-quality written texts. Moreover, while reflective journaling reduced the students’ writing anxiety, it also developed their self-confidence and motivation to write. In his empirical study, Dabbagh (2017) examined the impact of journaling on various aspects of writing performance, including content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics, among 84 Iranian high school students assigned into two groups. One group focused solely on descriptive writing, whereas the second group produced three journal entries while composing their descriptive essays. The findings revealed that journaling significantly improved the writing of content, organization, and vocabulary, while no significant effect was observed on language use and mechanics.

Hirose and Sasaki (2000) conducted a comparative study to examine the impact of journal writing on enhancing L2 students’

metaknowledge in English writing courses at a Japanese university. They defined metaknowledge as the explicit teaching on the rhetorical structure of a paragraph in English (p. 95). One group received only metaknowledge instruction, while the other group received both metaknowledge instruction and engaged in journal writing. The researchers found that the combination of metaknowledge instruction and journal writing significantly improved students' writing compared to the group that received metaknowledge instruction. In a similar vein, Tuan (2010) investigated if L2 students' engagement with reflective journaling would enhance their writing skills, with 85 college students enrolled in an academic writing class at a Chinese university. These students were divided into two groups; the first group was immersed in journal writing in and outside the classroom, while the second group only wrote the journal entries in class. Tuan's findings suggested that the first group showed more substantial improvement in their writing skills than the second group. Sudirman, Gemilang, and Kristanto (2021) examined how reflective journaling impacts L2 learners' capacity to enhance their writing skills, with a particular focus on ideas articulation. Their research included a group of 21 students from an Indonesian university. The researchers found that reflective journaling helped students critically reflect on their writing and pay closer attention to key writing aspects such as structure, unity, coherence, and flow of ideas.

Despite the growing interest in incorporating journals into L2 learning, studies that directly address the use of reflective journaling within L2 writing contexts remain limited. This scarcity is further amplified when considering L2 undergraduate students, particularly in a Saudi context, where cultural and linguistic factors may influence their engagement with reflective journaling and writing practices. Hence, the current research endeavors to enrich the scholarly works and offer significant perspectives by examining the writing practices of L2 Saudi undergraduate students, with a particular focus on their reflective journals.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Research Design*

The present study employed a qualitative research design to examine how reflective journal writing contributes to L2 students' academic writing practices. Qualitative research is known for its ability to investigate the depth and complexity of phenomena, particularly when shaped by participants' experiences and perceptions (Yin, 2011). Therefore, this study used qualitative data collection and analysis methods because they were appropriate to scrutinize and interpret personal experiences and perspectives surrounding reflective journaling (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

#### *3.2 Context and Participants*

The study was conducted in 2023 at a large public Saudi university, focusing on undergraduate students majoring in English language and translation. They were taking a mandatory academic writing course, offered twice a week, each class lasting for 90 minutes. In this course, the students were required to compose five-paragraph essays of different genres (e.g., argument, narrative). To compose a complete five-paragraph essay of a specific genre, students dedicated approximately two weeks to the process. At the same time, they actively engaged in various writing activities, such as free writing and peer review.

Patton (2014) emphasized that the purposive sampling approach allows researchers to explore phenomena in greater depth and gain rich insights that might be missed with other sampling strategies. To ensure a focused study, participants were chosen specifically from those enrolled in the 'academic writing' course. Thirteen female students were selected according to the following inclusion criteria: a) their willingness to participate, which was expressed in signing the informed consent, and b) their active engagement with the practice of reflection, demonstrated through the writing of at least eight journal entries. Most participants were aged between 20 and 22 and engaged in reflective journaling for the first time. All participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. They were also informed that their participation would not affect their grades in the course, and their names would be kept anonymous. After obtaining their signed informed consent forms, each student was given pseudonyms.

#### *3.3 Data Collection*

##### *3.3.1 Reflective Journals*

The primary data source was reflective journals, in which the participants wrote about issues related to their writing practices. Since the idea of writing reflective journals was new to the participants, I conducted a meeting session during the first week of the semester to explicitly explain the purpose and the process of writing reflective journals. I asked the participants to write at least two reflective journals a week. I also encouraged them to write about their reactions to their writing practices and how they coped with the writing tasks.

The journal tool available on the Blackboard course management system, the university's educational platform, was used to post students' journal entries. All students had free access to it and were familiar with its operation. To ensure the privacy of students' journal postings, I organized all the students into separate private groups. Each group involved two members: a student and the researcher. Others could not access the written reflective journals in these private journaling spaces. To encourage the participants to continue writing their reflective journals, I sent weekly emails as reminders, requesting that they complete the journaling task by the end of the week.

##### *3.3.2 Semi-structured Interviews*

According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), interviews help researchers discover nuanced insights in a more conversational and less restrictive format that might not emerge through other methods. Therefore, this study utilized semi-structured interviews to delve deeper into the participants' experiences and perceptions about the role of reflective journals in their academic writing practices. I interviewed all the

participants at the end of the semester, once they had fulfilled the requirements of the course, The interview questions focused on their experience with and perception of reflective journals and how they affected their writing practices. Although an interview protocol was designed, probes fostered deeper discussions whenever intriguing topics were addressed (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Yin, 2011). Participants were allowed to choose either English or Arabic for the interview. Each interview was audio-taped and lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. Detailed information on participant pseudonyms, the number of journal entries completed by each participant, and the duration of their interviews is provided in Table 1 in the Appendix).

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The present study employed a qualitative content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) for examining the written reflective journals and transcribed interviews. Miles and Huberman (1994) described “qualitative analysis” as “an iterative set of processes.” (p. 23). In this sense, the data analysis process of this study started with the data preparation stage, which was essential for organizing the collected data and facilitating the following stages of data analysis. All the journal entries (n = 183) were transformed into a Word document, where they were organized by each participant in chronological order. Furthermore, the interviews, which lasted approximately four hours and 45 minutes, were transcribed verbatim with the help of a transcription software called f4transkript. Some students used Arabic or mixed English and Arabic; thus, the transcribed interviews were translated into English. All the translated texts, whether journal entries or interviews, were checked for accuracy by a university professor who speaks English and Arabic.

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) pointed out that qualitative content analysis involves systematically categorizing and interpreting textual data to identify patterns, themes, and meanings. Qualitative content analysis is an inductive and dynamic process; therefore, I analyzed the textual data according to Elo and Kyngäs’ (2008) suggestion of three phases:

#### 3.4.1 Initial Stage

This stage requires a comprehensive understanding of the content of the data to identify a suitable unit of analysis. Therefore, I read the reflective journals and listened to the recording multiple times. Then, the texts related to the students’ writing practices were extracted and became a unit for analysis.

#### 3.4.2 Open Coding Stage

In this phase, I read and reread the textual data word by word and line by line to identify initial codes. I focused on words related to writing practices such as summary, citation, argument, and peer review. This open-coding process yielded a list of preliminary codes.

#### 3.4.3 Generating Categories.

I read and reviewed the textual data in this stage to refine the code list developed in the open coding phase. Then, I thoroughly read the initial codes to group them into meaningful clusters of themes according to their similarity and regularity. As the themes began to emerge, I conducted another coding cycle to look for patterns of similarity between the themes to be organized into broader categories. Then, I revisited the themes to refine and ensure the categories were exclusive. Each category was labeled with a particular name, expressing the essence of the category.

### 3.5 Trustworthiness

To confirm the study’s credibility and trustworthiness, I used member checking strategy in two ways. First, after transcribing the interviews, I showed them to the participants to verify their accuracy. Since some interviews were translated into English, I asked participants to verify if the translations accurately captured their perspectives. Second, I asked a rater, an expert university professor in discourse analysis, to independently read and review the textual data to check the validity of the coding process. We conducted discussion sessions at every data analysis stage to validate the identified codes and the emerging categories. Our discussions yielded an agreement of 85% regarding the initial list developed in the open coding stage and 94% for the identified categories, both of which suggested very good qualitative reliability according to Miles and Huberman (1994).

In addition, I used direct quotes from the participants’ journaling and interviews to strengthen the study’s trustworthiness by fostering credibility and richness. Verbatim quotes allow readers to directly engage with the participants’ voice, which ensures the transparency of the results (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Furthermore, this practice offers valuable insights into participants’ experiences and perceptions, enhancing the depth of the results (Yin, 2011). To ensure transparency and preserve participants’ voice, all direct quotes extracted from students’ journal entries and interviews were presented verbatim, without modifications to grammar, vocabulary, or mechanics. This approach was employed throughout the study.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The qualitative analysis of the students’ reflective journals and interviews yielded four major themes. These themes included (1) navigating the landscape of academic writing, (2) monitoring writing progress and refining writing skills, (3) cultivating an academic writer identity, and (4) the challenges of reflective journaling. I discuss these themes in the following sections, showing how reflective journals contributed to the participants’ writing practices. Further, I provide illustrative examples from students’ journal entries and interviews, demonstrating their experiences and perspectives on reflective journaling.

### 4.1 Navigating the Landscape of Academic Writing

For L2 students, engaging in academic writing could be described as navigating an unfamiliar and complex landscape. This intellectual

realm, governed by specific norms and expectations, can be daunting for those still mastering the nuances of academic discourse. Nevertheless, reflective journals appeared as an empowering tool for the participants, helping them to navigate the complexity of academic writing. Through journaling, they brainstormed ideas to overcome their writing challenges, cultivated critical stances on their writing practices, and developed an understanding of academic writing conventions.

One of the most challenging tasks, especially for L2 students, is initiating the writing process (Zamel, 1983). Reflective journaling proved to be an effective tool in helping participants overcome this initial hurdle. They used reflective journals as sounding boards, generating ideas and expressing their inner thoughts about the assigned topics. The following journal entry illustrates how a student used reflection to generate starting points for her essay.

*“Our essay is about “women in military”. Some people say military is only for men because it dangerous. Why shouldn't women have chance to do join the military? I will write how women are strong and can be trained like men. To support my ideas maybe I interview with female soldiers? Write a story about brave woman in military? So many options! But what about others opinion? Some women might not want to be in military but want do different things. I write both opinions. I have many thoughts! Maybe I make mind map. I draw circle for “women in military” then connect lines to all my ideas: interviews and stories. I hope I can show everyone that women are powerful in military. But it's okay if they choose different job. That's their power.”* (Wejdan, Journal entry-March, 2023).

The above journal excerpt exemplified the participants' typical journaling practice. It highlighted their involvement in self-dialogue to brainstorm and unpack their initial thoughts on new topics. Moreover, the participants explicitly revealed in their interviews that the internal reflections enabled them to break their writing blocks and gave them confidence to begin with clear directions. The following extracts are from the participants' interviews illustrating this idea.

*“When the teacher say write essay, my mind go blank! No word, no grammar. I keep thinking, what I write? And I go to journal. It is my best place. I write the topic. I don't know where to start. Then I ask myself, What about the topic? Slowly, slowly, ideas come! Then I have a sentence, and another sentence, and then the essay starts.”* (Sara, Interview-May, 2023).

*“For every new essay I have many ideas, but they are like everywhere. I can't focus. Here is idea and this is another idea and I feel exhausted and very stressed. When I write journal, I talk to myself like, Okay, catch this idea! Write down each one, even if it seems crazy. Then, I can see which idea is the best, which idea makes the most sense. The best idea is to write where I start my essay.”* (Nora, Interview-May, 2023).

In the above quotes, the students clearly articulated the challenges that prevent them from beginning writing. These linguistic challenges, as expressed by Sara (“no word, no grammar”), or psychological problems, as revealed by Nora (“I feel exhausted and very stressed”), were also expressed by L2 writers in Rizwan and Naas' (2022) study. The participants' acknowledgment of their struggle to start writing their essays and seek practical solutions to overcome this challenge is a sort of critical thinking. This finding resonates with Sudirman et al. (2021), who also found that reflective journaling promoted critical thinking skills among L2 students.

Furthermore, reflective journaling helped the students develop critical stances toward the given topic. Through reflective journaling, they engaged more deeply with the topics' complexities, questioned different perspectives, and sought improvement strategies to enhance their writing. The following journal entries demonstrate how the participants developed critical stances while navigating complex and contentious topics.

*“Women in the military. At the beginning, I thought the topic is very simple, but I found it more difficult. There are strong arguments about the physical and mental strength of the women joining the military and there are strong arguments about the challenges. This essay forces me to look at the evidence carefully and consider both opinions of the argument to avoid my own biases”* (Nora, Journal entry-March, 2023).

*“In my counter-argument, I write about the reasons why people should reject vegetarianism, like the idea that meat is important for health. But, in my refutation I stress the research on how vegetarian diets can provide the necessary nutrients. It's a complicated argument but I'm learning how to deal with different views while supporting my opinion.”* (Suzan, Journal entry-April, 2023).

The preceding journal entries showed how the students questioned different assumptions about various topics at different stages of their writing process. For example, Nora first embraced a “simple” perspective while drafting her thesis statement. However, she realized the complexity behind the issue and began questioning the underlying assumptions “about the challenges” facing women in the military. Similarly, Suzan confronted the prevalent belief that “meat is important for health” in her writing about vegetarianism. She acknowledged the importance of “vegetarian diets” in her refutation. Indeed, the students' realization of the debates surrounding their topics demonstrated that they questioned their initial biases and actively explored strategies to reinforce their arguments. As such, they enhanced their critical stances toward the assigned topics, a crucial component in writing argumentative essays (Hyland, 1990).

Another significant benefit of reflective journaling was helping students in understanding academic writing norms and expectations. The following extracts from students' interviews illustrate how journal writing helped them follow academic writing standards.

*“In the first post for every new essay, I make an outline before I start writing. I write my thesis statement and I link the main points in my thesis statement to the topic sentences... In every topic sentence I put points and supporting evidence.... Then I*

*restate the thesis in my conclusion. It is my reference and every time I write I go back to this first post to remind me of the organization of my essay.” (Rose, Interview-, May, 2023).*

*“Writing the citations is hard! Teacher said we must write in APA. It’s confusing where to put them and how to write them correctly. Every time I write a citation I have to go to the old post I wrote about APA to revise and correct my new citations. Whenever I learn something new about APA, I add it to the post. It is like a reference.” (Fatin, Interview-May, 2023).*

As the above quotes showed, Rose’s methodological approach to outlining her essay and revisiting her initial post helped her foster a logical flow in her essay. Fatin also articulated that improving and revisiting her initial journal entry about “APA style” helped her overcome her difficulty in “writing the citations.” Both students acknowledged that their journal entries served as a “reference,” which effectively helped them adhere to the conventions of academic writing.

#### 4.2 Monitoring Writing Progress and Refining Writing Skills

Academic writing requires students not only to construct compelling essays but also to actively and consciously monitor their writing process to grow as confident and skilled writers (Cresswell, 2000). Reflective journaling was a valuable space that encouraged the participants to monitor their own writing experiences and enhance their writing skills. For example, Amal reflected in her journal:

*“When I wrote the last draft of the thesis statement for my essay ‘Being Vegetarian or Not’ I noticed a change in my skill to write complex sentences. If I compare this to my first and second drafts, I see improvement in my thesis statement. In the past my thesis statements were unclear. Now, I can write a thesis focused on elements of my argument... How to write topic sentences connected to my thesis is the thing that I need to work hard on” (Amal, Journal entry-April, 2023).*

Amal’s journal entry provided insights into her effort to monitor and enhance her writing. While highlighting the evolution of her thesis statement, Amal identified a key area of improvement in her writing: her ability “to write complex sentences.” Moreover, when comparing her earlier thesis statement drafts, she noted a shift from “unclear” to a more “focused” thesis. However, Amal acknowledged a new challenge: composing “topic sentences connected” to her thesis. Amal demonstrated how reflective journaling helped her acknowledge her strengths and identify her weaknesses. This self-awareness was crucial for effective self-monitoring, allowing her to set goals to track her progress (Cresswell, 2000; Zhang, Li, Chieh, & Han, 2022). This finding aligns with a prior study by Liao and Wong (2007), who discovered that reflective journaling provided L2 students with insights to articulate their writing strengths and identify their weaknesses to monitor their writing progress.

Comparing past and present writing practices as a conscious effort to monitor and refine the writing skills also emerged in students’ journal entries. For instance, Reem wrote the following journal entry:

*“Today I write the first sentence of my essay about women in the army. It is called a hook. I must make it interesting. I think about strong women. I write, ‘Women in army, like unseen heroes in history.’ When I check my old writings I find my introductions are not good. Now, I start better. I learn how to catch readers’ attention. Still I need practice, but I’m happy because I am improving.” (Reem, Journal entry-March, 2023).*

Reem’s focus on composing a captive hook for her essay revealed her effort to improve her introduction, a crucial aspect of engaging readers (Hyland, 1990). She compared her current attempt to “catch readers’ attention” with her “old writings,” which demonstrated an awareness of her progress (e.g., “Now, I start better”), a key characteristic of self-monitoring (Cresswell, 2000). Reem’s self-assessment is further underscored by her acknowledgment of needing further “practice,” highlighting her proactive approach toward continuous learning and improvement. Furthermore, throughout the process of monitoring their writing progress, students moved beyond just identifying their weaknesses in writing. They explicitly formulated specific goals to enhance their writing practices. For example, Mona documented:

*“Teacher commented, ‘where is the bridge?’ I did not understand at that time. Now, I know the bridge! It is the transitions! Before, I just jump from one point to the other one. One paragraph talks about one thing, then I talk about something else. Now, I try hard. I use words like ‘also,’ ‘moreover’ and ‘to conclude.’ My goal is to make transitions smooth. But I know I need to learn more.” (Mona, Journal entry- March, 2023).*

Similar to other participants, Mona identified her writing weakness. She described her early writings as jumps “from one point to the other one,” acknowledging that transitions needed improvement. She set a clear goal of “making transitions smooth.” This overarching objective guided her exploration of resources that appeared in different journal entries. For instance, she wrote:

*“I post about words for transitions. I found a website with words grouped like ‘add more’ or ‘show different.’ I write all the words that I learned from the internet. I add transitions that my classmates used in their essays. My goal is to practice using transitions, maybe use different ones that are not the same all time.” Each time I write, I come back to this post to mark the transitions I used and not used. This post is like a transition dictionary.” (Mona, Journal entry- March, 2023)*

Mona revealed her techniques for mastering transition: researching websites, exploring classmates’ essays, and creating a personalized “transition dictionary.” Moreover, she recognized the pitfalls of repetition and set a new goal: “practice using transitions.” More importantly, Mona’s goal was not merely aspirational but based on a self-assessment approach. She repeatedly revisited her transition list, “marking the transitions” she “used and not used.” This act of continuous self-assessment allowed her to track her progress, identify areas needing improvement, and adjust her strategies accordingly. This finding aligns with the findings of Zhang et al. (2022), which emphasized the

importance of reflective journaling in developing self-monitoring, self-assessment, and goal-setting among L2 students. However, in contrast to Hirose and Sasaki (2000), who found that teaching writing combined with reflective journaling enhanced only the L2 students' writing mechanics, the present study provided empirical evidence on how reflective journaling assisted students in improving all aspects of their writing, such as the structure (as in Reem's case) and language use (as in Mona's example).

### 4.3 Cultivating an Academic Writer Identity

Academic writing in a second language is a process that moves beyond just mastering a new linguistic register. It also requires writers to incorporate their experiences and perspectives into their writings, thus constructing a unique writer identity (Matsuda, 2015). Through reflective journaling, participants articulated their beliefs and explored their evolving academic identities. Reflecting on their values and beliefs allowed them to infuse authenticity into their academic writing, effectively connecting their values with the academic discourse. For example, Amal wrote:

*"Today, I revised the second draft of the body paragraphs of my essay about vegetarianism. I have topic sentences, counter-arguments, and evidence. But I feel something is missing. Then when I asked myself "What does vegetarianism mean to me?" I got it. It's not about the environment or animal protection. It's about living according to my beliefs and values I hold strongly, like empathy and responsibility. So, I open my laptop quickly. I added my personal beliefs to the paragraphs. I related the facts to my values. Now, my paragraphs are not just about convincing my reader, it's about sharing a part of myself. And as I reread the revised paragraphs, I feel satisfied."* (Amal, Journal entry- April, 2023).

When revising the structural elements of her essay, Amal noticed a need for more personal engagement with the topic. In a moment of profound self-reflection, Amal realized that her position on the topic is deeply rooted in her values of "empathy and responsibility." Thus, her decision to incorporate her values into her essay transformed the paragraphs from objective expositions to expressions of her identity. Her satisfaction with the revised paragraphs indicated a successful emergence of her identity as an academic writer. While Amal's exploration of her values and identity seems to be driven by internal beliefs emerging from her essay's revision process, peers' perspectives inspired other students' journeys in exploring their values and identities. For instance, Tala reflected,

*"I reviewed my classmate's introduction on the topic vegetarianism. She wrote a good thesis statement. It made me think about the health and moral impacts of eating meat. Maybe I need to add personal feelings in my introduction. I show why sometimes I eat meat, sometimes I am vegetarian. I can show readers that it's OK to balance between morals and facts. My argument isn't just about facts, it's about my changing beliefs."* (Tala, Journal entry- April, 2023).

Tala revealed that reviewing her classmate's introduction inspired her to reconsider her perspective on the topic. Tala's decision to incorporate her "personal feelings" into her writing showed how L2 students use academic tasks as a medium to negotiate and articulate their values and beliefs to be accepted by the academic discourse community (Lee & Bucholtz, 2015). Also, her desire to integrate her "changing beliefs" into her writing suggested a fluid, evolving identity (Block, 2007), where she reconciled factual arguments with personal beliefs. This finding aligns with Norton's (2013) argument that writing is a social practice and a writer's identity is socially and discursively constructed.

The above journal entries depicted how the participants' reflections on the revision process revealed their values and identities. It is intriguing that participants also articulated their values and identities while reflecting on other aspects of their writings, such as grammar, word choice, and punctuation. For example, in her interview, Rawan said,

*"Prepositions are hard and confusing for me. In my journal, I practice them all the time. For example, I put in quotation marks. I write "at" school, not "in" school. This practice is helping me understand these small differences and it is important for my academic writing and to express myself correctly."* (Rawan, Interview- May, 2023).

Rawan's dedication to practicing prepositions within her journals reflected her beliefs in linguistic accuracy, which she perceived as integral to her academic writing and personal expression. Rawan's deliberate practice indicated a conscious effort to refine her linguistic identity and strive for mastery within the academic register. Moreover, Rawan's emphasis on using correct prepositions revealed her profound value: the significance of clarity and accuracy in communication, a fundamental aspect of her academic identity. In this way, Rawan's reflective journaling could be interpreted as an act of compliance with the norms of academic writing (Duff, 2010). This finding that reflective journaling contributed to the improvement of participants' grammar, as shown in Rawan's case, contradicts Dabbagh's (2017) finding that writing journals did not enhance the grammatical knowledge of the L2 students. This disagreement stems from the fact that Dabbagh (2017) evaluated the grammatical features in the students' essays, while the present study did not examine the participants' writings to assess their grammatical knowledge.

Similar to Rawan, Samera revealed her belief in the power of language to express her identity and ideas. However, she focused on expanding her lexical range rather than mastering grammar. In her interview, Samera said,

*"My journal is my lap where I experiment with my writing problems. One challenge is academic vocabulary. I challenge myself to use new and complex words. Every day, I write words and study them because I know that vocabulary is a strong power to express your thoughts and beliefs. Sometimes I write Arabic words instead of English. Even though it is against the rules, I think using Arabic helped me to express my beliefs very powerfully and this improved my writing."* (Samera, Interview- May, 2023).

Samera's recognition of the crucial role that academic vocabulary plays in articulating one's opinion is a key element of her value system. Thus, her journals served as a "lap" for learning and using "new and complex words," where she nurtured her identity as an independent

learner and a confident academic writer advocating her values (Ivanič, 1998). This transformation allowed her to assert her voice and actively participate in the privileged academic discourse in order to become a legitimate member of the community (Duff, 2010). Samera asserted that she often used “Arabic words instead of English,” which could be interpreted as an act of challenging the dominant academic norms. However, in such situations, Samera could not be seen as breaking the norms but as an act of expressing “the plural rather than the singular nature of voice” (Hirvela & Belcher, 2001, p. 45). Thus, she was constructing her authorial voice (Ivanič, 1998).

#### 4.4 Challenges and Difficulties of Reflective Journaling

The present study found that reflective journaling was not always a fascinating activity filled with profound opportunities to enhance the participants’ academic writing practices. Indeed, the participants explicitly revealed some challenges associated with reflective journaling. A significant concern articulated by many participants was the time commitment required for reflective journaling. For example, when Reem was asked about her experience with reflective journaling, she revealed,

*“It’s hard because I take a lot of time to find the correct words in English. It’s not my first language, so everything takes longer. I have other courses with many assignments and quizzes. I know it’s important, but time is a big problem for me.”* (Reem, Interview-May, 2023).

Reem highlighted the double burden she faced: the linguistic complexity of English compounded by other academic commitments, including “many assignments and quizzes,” which were significant barriers to constant journaling. Likewise, Hadeel expressed that the scarcity of time was her major challenge to keep journaling. However, her experience illustrated a different facet of this issue, as she elaborated:

*“It’s a good idea, but it’s hard. When I write a journal, I keep revising and revising because I want to make sure I write clearly. We have many assignments for other courses. Also, I’m in the students’ club and it takes up a lot of my time after college. When I finally sit to write my journal, it’s usually quite late. It feels like there’s never enough time.”* (Hadeel, Interview-May, 2023).

Hadeel’s emphasis on the quality of her writing through the intensive revision process of her reflective journals and her involvement in the “students’ club” reduced the time for consistent journaling. Reem and Hadeel justified that workload, time management, and language proficiency were the major reasons that make reflective journals time-consuming. This finding aligns with Ahmad’s (2020) finding, as the participants expressed that engaging in reflective journaling required a considerable time commitment.

Another notable challenge that the participants experienced was the need for more consistent feedback. Several participants expressed a need for more regular and constructive feedback from the instructor and peers on their reflective journal entries. One key aspect of this challenge lies in the students’ uncertainty about effectively translating their reflections into concrete improvements in their academic writing. For instance, Fatin wrote:

*“I spent a long time writing in my journal today about the last draft of my essay. I realized I’m stuck on the same words and I have problem to organize my ideas. I even discovered some grammar mistakes I keep making. I don’t know how to use these reflections to make my writing better. I wish there is more feedback, like specific examples. For me it’s not enough to just know these problems. I need advice on how to turn my reflections into better writing.”* (Fatin, Journal entry-May, 2023).

Here, Fatin revealed that her frustration stems from not providing her with “specific examples” or suggestions illustrating her identified writing problems. While recognizing the value of reflection, she acknowledged the crucial role of constructive feedback in bridging the gap between reflection and practical application (Allan & Driscoll, 2014; Moon, 2006). Moreover, her desire for “more feedback” aligns with research suggesting that L2 students benefit most from feedback that is constructive, timely, and focused on specific aspects of language use (Ellis, 2009). Roze also indicated that feedback from the teacher and peers on reflective journaling was important for improving writing. In her interview, she said,

*“Writing journals was an amazing experience, but I wished that my friends and teacher would read and comment on my journals. It was just me writing and commenting on myself. If they read, they will spot my mistakes and suggest how to improve the quality of my essays.”* (Roze, Journal entry-May, 2023).

Like most participants, Rose asserted that reflective journaling was used as a self-dialogue activity, which helped the participants talk about past experiences (Rassaei, 2015). However, this finding contradicts Zhang et al.’s (2022) finding that Chinese undergraduates used reflective journaling to communicate with the teacher and themselves, emphasizing that reflective journaling is a sociocultural activity. One possible justification for this discrepancy could be related to the students’ interactional strategy that the teacher selected, which prioritized in-class peer review over their interaction through reflective journals. Another possible reason is that the researcher protected the students’ privacy by preventing access to their classmates’ journal entries.

## 5. Conclusion

This qualitative study aimed to examine the impact of reflective journaling on the L2 undergraduate students’ academic writing practices and to explore their perceptions of using reflective journaling. The analysis of the collected data was presented in four major themes, offering valuable insights into the L2 students’ experiences and perspectives of reflective journaling. The first theme, navigating the landscape of academic writing, showed how reflective journaling fostered their ability to brainstorm solutions to writing challenges and develop critical stances, which ultimately deepened their understanding of academic writing norms. The second theme, monitoring writing



progress and refining writing skills, revealed how reflective journaling helped students articulate their writing strengths and identify their weaknesses. It also empowered them to set specific goals to track their writing progress and compare their past and present writing practices, leading to improvements in their writing skills. The third theme, cultivating an academic writer identity, illustrated that reflective journaling provided a safe space for questioning beliefs and exploring evolving identities, ultimately allowing students to construct their authoritative voices. However, the fourth theme, the challenges of reflective journaling, highlighted the potential difficulties the students encountered while journaling. The only reported challenges were time constraints and lack of constructive feedback on their journals.

Based on the findings, the present study advocates integrating reflective journaling into L2 writing instruction. Teachers are encouraged to consider using reflective journals to foster a deeper, more critical engagement with the academic writing process. More importantly, teachers should give students constant feedback for their journal entries to facilitate the reflective writing process and overcome its challenges. Furthermore, teachers should ensure that reflective journaling tasks are given to students in adequate numbers and at appropriate times to prevent students from experiencing stress and irritation.

It should be noted that this study acknowledges several limitations that suggest avenues for future research. First, the sample size ( $n=13$ ), while adequate for qualitative inquiry (Cresswell, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), limited the generalizability of the findings due to its size and lack of gender diversity. Moreover, this study conducted over a short period, thus limiting its ability to capture the long-term effects of reflective journaling on the students' academic writing. Further, the present study relied on qualitative data from a single group of participants without utilizing writing tests to empirically measure changes in students' writing proficiency, narrowing the scope of the findings. Lastly, this study did not explicitly consider the impact of feedback from peers and instructors on the written journals, an element crucial in shaping students' reflective practices (Zhang et al., 2022) and writing development (Ellis, 2009).

In light of these limitations, future research could consider expanding the research design to include a large number of participants, encompassing both genders, to offer a through perspectives on how reflective journaling influences L2 writing. Furthermore, conducting a longitudinal study could provide profound insights into the sustained impact of reflective journaling on L2 students' writings over time. In addition, conducting a mixed-methods study that includes quantitative assessments of writing improvement, such as pre- and post-writing tests, could support the qualitative findings. Comparing groups' engagement with reflective practices could also present the specific contribution of this activity to academic writing development. Future research could explore the role of peer and instructor feedback in the reflective journaling process and its impact on the students' writing practices. Such research could significantly broaden our understanding of the pedagogical application of reflective journaling in L2 academic writing contexts.

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**Appendix**

Table 1. Summary of Participant Pseudonyms, Journal Entries, and Interview Durations

Participant Pseudonym	Number of Journal Entries	Interview Duration (Minutes)
Sara	15	20:22
Nora	13	25:12
Wejdan	16	28:40
Rawan	12	22:10
Suzan	14	15:02
Samera	16	18:33
Hadeel	17	21:00
Roze	15	26:24
Fatin	13	30:01
Mona	12	30:00
Reem	10	17:01
Tala	15	19:20
Amal	15	13:15
Total	183 journal entry	268:8 minutes (4:77 hours)