

USING REFLECTIVE JOURNALS FOR LEARNING ENGLISH AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS VIA GOOGLE DRIVE

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ABSTRACT

Reflection is an important practice where teachers construct the meanings and knowledge that guide students' actions in the classroom. Reflective journal is advocated as a way to enhance teaching and learning. Most studies of reflective journals focus on its potential in promoting the process of teaching and learning, and the impacts of it on students' outcomes or motivation. The study used both quantitative and qualitative research approaches to examine the benefits of using reflective journals in teaching English to primary school students as well as their attitudes. It employed instruments such as questionnaires, students' reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews to collect data from 45 students at a primary school in Danang, Vietnam. The findings indicate four main benefits that reflective journals bring to primary school students. In addition, the study results showed students' positive feelings and attitudes towards writing reflective journals.

Keywords: reflection, reflective journals, benefits, primary school students, attitudes

INTRODUCTION

Along with the social changes, teaching and learning have been evolving to suit the newly emerging requirements. Furthermore, in terms of evaluating students, the grades are not sufficient to measure students' performance. Education should serve not only as a means of gathering information but also as a way to incorporate learning into our daily actions and behaviors. Therefore, teachers need a more personal approach for specific feedback to help students progress in their learning. As teachers and students are moving towards more formative assessment, new strategies of evaluation are required, one of these being the reflective journal. A reflective journal is a written paper that explains, analyzes, and transmits students' experience and encourages a multifaceted conversation with teachers (Holly, 1989). A reflective journal is not only a tool for teachers to evaluate students' learning process but also a way for students to improve their learning by themselves.

The current research investigated an effective way in which students both experience their learning and achieve mastery through the means of student self-reflection in active learning. Although the usefulness of reflective journals was recognized as early as the '80s, this method is rarely used academically, or at least there are no reports on such activities. The reason for this is that the effect of a competitive, numbers-driven culture has influenced the participation and importance of school and learning among students. As a consequence, an atmosphere of apathy and lack of importance has led to passivity for students. Also, when teachers are required to teach a multitude of learning requirements, the priority of those standards for effective learning results in the failure to teach them all effectively and students

lose their voice to engage in their own learning. Teachers fail to promote the constructive and authentic learning of all required curricula because of the relationship between learning norms and high-stakes assessment.

In Vietnam, this type of assessment is uncommon and is not used in schools much, especially in primary schools. Therefore, the current study aimed to investigate the benefits of using reflective journals in teaching English to primary school students and examine their attitudes towards writing reflective journals in order to introduce reflective journals as a new means to improve learning performance in Vietnam. The study is guided by two following questions:

1. What are the benefits of using reflective journals for primary school student's learning process?
2. What are the students' attitudes towards writing reflective journals?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reflective Journal

A journal is "a sequential dated chronicle of events and ideas, which includes the personal responses and reflections of the writer (writers) on those events and ideas" (Stevens & Cooper, 2009, p.5). It is a style of writing that includes a record of daily life, individual thoughts and community perceptions (Hiemstra, 2001). Journals also gave access to a wealth of rich and real artefacts regarding one's personal insights about their experiences (Halbach, 2000) because journals provide elements that cannot be observed which are hidden or inaccessible (Bailey & Ochsner, 1983). Therefore, when people rethink events through writing, they see findings that are not normally visible since it is an introspective activity. Because journals allow surveillance of invisible aspects of oneself, keeping journals is a beneficial activity for humans. As the positive characteristics of journal writing were seen in a range of fields, journaling was deemed to be a fruitful activity in any educational sector.

Journals are easy to assign but difficult to score, and many of these means of personal contemplation should not be graded. They offer a means for students to share their thoughts and feelings about the service experiences during the lessons and, with guidance, reflective journals can relate personal learning to the lesson content. Nevertheless, there is a general propensity for reflective journals to become a simple record of events rather than a reflective activity in which students view service practice in the context of learning goals. Writing journals are an effective way to develop self-understanding and strengthen intra-personal skills and can be collected and checked at least three times in the semester. According to Suzanne (1995), journal reflection is a valuable reference guide for service-learning educators.

Reflective journals can be used for many different purposes. When analyzing more than one hundred journal writing papers, Moon (1999) listed and pointed out about eighteen journal writing uses. Most journals have to meet more than one purpose and the goals set by the teacher are not the same as those to be met or interpreted by the students. In terms of pedagogy, reflective journals can be used as a means of communication between teachers and students as well as a type of self-assessment.

According to Alvyda and Regina (2009), reflective journals are used for four basic purposes. Firstly, reflective journal writing is a way that accentuates desirable conditions for student's learning. It provides intellectual space which enables them to think easily and supports individual learning. Learners need to write their own journals, and they can track the process at their own speed. Writing a reflective journal offers an opportunity to collect thoughts

and see the whole knowledge-gathering system. Learning from a journal strengthens learning habits, as it allows students to deal with a lot of information or content. Secondly, journal writing promotes reflection related to profound learning methods or deep learning. In this kind of learning, the purpose of students is to improve a personal understanding of the subject and to connect it to what is already understood. Writing a reflective journal will support students' effort to understand. Thirdly, writing reflective journals helps encourage students' metacognition. It is an effective way to develop metacognitive skills which are divided into two types, self-assessment and self-management (Rivers, 2001). It is likely that much free writing in journals will contain some metacognition and if journals are structured, then metacognition can be built in. Lastly, the act of writing is associated with learning or the enhancement of learning. There is considerable literature on the relationship of writing to learning, how it forces students to clarify their thoughts, how it is a powerful form of feedback to them, how it focuses attention and tells them if they do or do not understand.

Many researchers have indicated that journal writing is used for learning development in multiple educational settings. It has been used to help the recognition and evaluation of influences that affect writers as part of scholarly study. In these diverse settings, journals have been used and formatted in several ways in learning.

The Use of Reflective Journal Writing in Learning Process

The use of reflective journals as a tool to improve the learning process has been the subject of numerous studies. O'Connell and Dymont (2006) pointed out some benefits of the reflective journal as a tool to encourage students to reflect on their own learning as well as improving their writing skills. Also, the use of reflective journals in promoting reflection and learning in nursing students after registration was examined in the study of Chirema (2007). This research indicated that reflective journal writing "can be used as evidence for the presence or absence of reflective thinking" (p.14). Moreover, it is an effective tool to promote reflecting and learning when students become more aware of their academic achievement.

Lew and Schmidt (2007) indicated that "students' beliefs about the usefulness of journal writing in enabling students to think and write effectively are related to their beliefs about improving learning through frequent journal writing, and the use of the journal writing as an impression management tool, and as a means to feedback on teamwork" (p.579). They found that using reflection journals provides a lot of opportunities not only for students to reflect on their learning but for teachers to monitor their students' learning progress through reflections as well.

Spalding and Wilson (2002) examined the reflective journals of 34 students, finding that reflective journal writing is important for them as it acts as a daily diary of thoughts and experiences, establishes and maintains a relationship with the facilitator; provides a safe outlet for frustration and anxiety; and supports internal dialogue. Similarly, Sen (2010) investigated students' reflective writing in terms of identifiable results and explored students' thinking about reflection and reflective journal writing as a process. The research showed that the most important advantage of reflective journals appeared when students "were most analytical in their reflection and expressed that in deeply analytical reflective writing" (p.91). Also, Gil-Garcia and Cintron (2002) suggested that analyzing and observing in reflective journals critically can help teachers to "critique and modify students' practice" (p.4).

Statement by Maloney and Campbell-Evans (2002), "provides opportunities for students and teachers to make practical theory explicit" (p.39) stated the relationship between reporters

and their audience. Critical review can allow students and teachers to critically change their work (Gil-Garcia and Cintron, 2002).

According to Gleaves et al. (2008), writing a reflective journal allows students to objectively examine and potentially change their own thought, perspectives, or actions. Gibbs (1988) developed an experiment that would allow students to reflect in a more systemic and organized way. This allowed students to log their thoughts in order to distinguish subjective and logical thinking about their thinking (Quinton & Smallbone, 2010). Throughout time, the systemic approach has become an experience that will enhance and affect future critical thinking (Boud et al., 1985).

The Use of Reflective Journal Writing in Language Learning

Previous research on language learning journals includes three separate intentions: exploration of language acquisition (Bailey, 1983; Schmidt & Frota, 1984; Schumann & Schumann, 1977), improvement of language learning skills (Ogawa & Hall, 2011; Porto, 2007; Trites, 2001), and review of the learning environment of learners and the circumstances under which the learning mode of learners is described (Carson & Longhini, 2002; Halbach, 2000; Mei, 2003).

With regards to the intent of journal writing to explore the mechanism of language acquisition, some researchers have used journals to observe how language learning has unfolded. For example, Schmidt and Frota (1986) performed a descriptive and empirical case study to track what had occurred in the language learning process of a target language country. They observed the process of interacting with native speakers through witnessing and documenting interactions and noticed in a journal entry that while students were aware of language learning, they could not use it in conversation. Therefore, self-understanding through the language learning process from writing reflective journals, which identified various language learning types and explored interactions in the target language culture can be obtained through journal writing.

More recently, journal writing has been actively applied for language learning in order to develop appropriate methods of teaching. Carson and Longhini (2002) used Spanish-language writing journals to explain students' use of learning strategies. Halbach (2000) has used language journals in an English course to figure out how students use learning methods and how those methods affect their learning. These two studies showed that teachers were able to track student learning process in accordance with specific elements or activities. Many studies showed that journal writing has recently been adapted as another avenue for improving valuable language learning capabilities, such as autonomy (Ogawa & Hall, 2011; Porto, 2007). Porto (2007) claimed that Spanish learners maximize autonomy by introspection in the writing of journals.

It is noticed that reflective journal writing is crucial in maximizing interaction among students, increasing motivation, and developing their critical thinking skills. Furthermore, some researchers reported that students study better in the subject by using reflective journals. However, studies on using reflective journal writing in the Vietnamese teaching context, especially in primary schools, are not abundant. Therefore, this research aimed at investigating the benefits of reflective journal writing for primary school students as well as their attitudes to help teachers encourage students to write reflective journals effectively.

METHOD AND SAMPLING

Research Design

The current study adopted the multimethod research design to fulfil the research objectives. Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered and analyzed to address the research questions.

Participants

The participants included 45 students (22 males and 23 females) in a grade-5 class at a primary school in Danang city, Vietnam. All of them are 11 years old and have learned English as a compulsory subject since they were in grade 3. The students have similar characteristics and come from similar backgrounds. None of them has ever written a reflective journal on language learning before.

Instrumentation and Procedure

In order to answer the research questions, the following instruments were employed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data for analysis.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was adapted from the one by Mohamed (2012) but made simpler to suit elementary school students. It consisted of 14 questions and was used to assess each student's reflection level on their experiences. The questionnaire used the 4-point scale of Likert (Strong disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strong Agree) to force the students to choose between agreement and disagreement. The questionnaire aimed to evoke students' views on the effects of reflective journal writing, strengthening and enhancing language learning, as well as exploring its importance and convenience.

Students' Reflective Journals

The journals were used for formative assessment in which the students wrote about the knowledge they learned and the activities they did during the class. They also wrote what they liked or what they needed to improve in the lessons; shared their thoughts, feelings, and experiences and evaluated their learning process. The treatment's key goal was to improve the journals as a formative assessment instrument and a tool for developing a sense of place. These student-created objects aided the research by revealing the extent and depth of thought that was taking place. To encourage the students to submit their reflective journals for each lesson as soon as possible for immediate comments, the teacher created a Google form as the online platform. The students completed the printed reflective journals and take their photos to send to the teachers via this platform.

Semi-structured Interviews

In order to increase the reliability of the study, semi-structured interviews were held to vary the source of data. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese so that the participants could fully express their opinions. Nine questions were used to interview the students. The researcher recorded, transcribed and translated the interview transcripts into English. Ten students having

different experiences of using reflective journals were purposefully selected to participate in the follow-up interviews.

Procedure

The procedure of data collection is chronologically organized. First, at the weekly meetings, students were asked to write reflective journals about their language learning. Reflective journals were written three to four times a week for six weeks as the first data tool. The participants were required to write them in English. Next, they completed a questionnaire on their experiences after writing reflective journals. Then, ten students selected were interviewed for their entire journaling experience.

Data Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative data analysis was applied in order to answer the research questions. The data from the questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively by using SPSS 20. Descriptive analysis was used to analyze the frequency percentage and mean scores of each item in the questionnaire. Thematic analysis which is "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79) was done to the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews.

FINDINGS

The Benefits of Using Reflective Journals

This section reports the findings to address the first research question, "What are the benefits of using reflective journals for primary school student's learning process?". The findings were derived from the questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews. Four major benefits of reflective journals were indicated.

Providing Opportunity for Students to Gain Self-knowledge

Table 1 presents the descriptive data for each item related to the aspect of how reflective journals assist students in gaining self-knowledge.

Table 1: Gaining self-knowledge by using reflective journals

Statement	M	SD	Frequency			
			Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. I can remember vocabulary and structures quickly.	3.36	0.71	1 (2.2%)	3 (6.7%)	20 (44.4%)	21 (46.7%)
2. I can know what I have learned in class easily.	3.29	0.76	2 (4.4%)	2 (4.4%)	22 (48.9%)	19 (42.2%)
3. I can review the vocabulary and grammar after the class.	3.51	0.69	1 (2.2%)	2 (4.4%)	15 (33.3%)	27 (60.0%)

As revealed in Table 2, most of the students agreed with the notion that reflective journals' writing is a tool to help them gain self-knowledge. 21 students (46.7%) strongly

agreed and 20 students (44.4%) agreed with the statement "I can remember vocabulary and structures quickly" while only four disagreed with it. Similarly, more than 90% of the students agreed with Statements 2 and 3. This means that thanks to writing reflective journals, the students had the opportunity to recall and repeat the vocabulary and structures they had learned. The repetition of newly learned vocabulary and structures was the way to help children remember the lesson more easily. Therefore, when writing reflective journals, the students had the chance to repeat the vocabulary and structures they learned once more, helping them to learn and remember faster.

During interview, some students confirmed writing reflective journals helping them gain self-knowledge:

I1: "Writing reflective journals has helped me remember the words I learned and when I review them at home, I can memorize those words faster."

I2: "I can know what I learned, who I worked with and what activities I liked. I think that I film an English lesson myself by writing reflective journals."

This can be explained that when writing reflective journals, students remembered the activities they had participated in; the vocabulary and the structure they learned; the parts that were interesting or made them feel good; the way they studied, which made it possible for them to know what they had learned in an English class, how they had studied and who they had worked with. What's more, this helped them review the new words and structures after each class by answering the questions in the reflective journal forms. An example of a student's work is shown in Figure 1.

MY ENGLISH CLASS
 Name: Ngoc Class: 5/4 Date: 19/11/2021
 For the topic: Unit 7
 I know all the vocabulary YES NO
 I can remember the structure YES NO
 I learn: cinema, post office, theatre, supermarket, park, museum, pharmacy, bus stop, restaurant, hospital, school
 I like: vocabulary
 I should improve (Tôi nên cải thiện): the structure
 I worked: alone
 I feel: happy
 My work is: NOT GOOD! OK! GOOD! GREAT!

Figure 1: Example of a student's reflective journal

Helping Students to Evaluate their Learning

As shown in Table 2, most of the students agreed with the two statements.

Table 2: Understanding the lesson by using reflective journals

Statement	M	SD	Frequency			
			Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
4. I can know what I should improve in the lesson.	3.24	0.93	3 (6.7%)	6 (13.3%)	13 (28.9%)	23 (51.1%)
5. I can evaluate my learning.	3.10	0.82	2 (4.4%)	7 (15.6%)	21 (46.7%)	15 (33.3%)

In spite of being the same category which had a quite high mean value, the statement "I can know what I should improve in the lesson" had higher stronger agreement than the other with a higher rate of strongly agreement (51.1%). Furthermore, the percentage of disagreement was at a low rate (approximately 15%), which proved that the reflective journals helped the students initially evaluate their learning process, and recognize their strengths and weaknesses, as shown in an example of a student's reflective journal (Figure 1).

In the design of the reflective journal model, there were some sections where students shared what they learned; what they needed to improve (*I should improve...*) or how they worked (*My work is...*), which helped the students evaluate their learning process. For example, in the photo, the student had self-assessed whether her learning was good or not (*Great!*). Also, she saw that the point she needed to pay attention to was the structure and she should improve it. Thanks to reflective journal writing, the teacher saw what the students did not do well to have appropriate solutions to their learning problems and improve their learning outcomes.

Helping Students to Share Experiences, Thoughts and Feelings

Table 3 presents specific quantitative data related to what extent reflective journals support learners to share their experiences, thoughts and feelings.

Table 3: Sharing experiences, thoughts and feelings via reflective journals

Statement	M	SD	Frequency			
			Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
8. I can talk about my experiences.	2.82	0.91	4 (8.9%)	11 (24.4%)	19 (42.2%)	11 (24.4%)
9. I can express my thoughts about the lesson.	3.04	0.67	1 (2.2%)	6 (13.3%)	28 (62.2%)	10 (22.2%)
10. I can express my feelings.	3.00	0.83	3 (11.4%)	6 (22.9%)	24 (48.6%)	12 (17.1%)

Regarding the category of sharing experiences, thoughts and feelings, the students had different points. As can be seen from Table 3, the statement "I can express my thoughts about the lesson" was agreed by most of the investigated students (62.2% agree and 22.2% strongly agree) while the statement "I can talk about my experiences" had a higher rate in disagreement (8.4% strongly disagree and 24.4% disagree) in comparison with two others. In the interview extract below, one participant elaborated upon the reasons why they did not like to share their experiences, thoughts or feelings:

I5: "I find that expressing feelings is a bit difficult for me, because I'm a guy, I don't like to talk about my feelings to others, I think that girls are easier to show their feelings than boys. In addition, I prefer to talk about my own thoughts about the class, which will help the teacher know so that she can improve the lesson to suit me."

It can be explained that because the investigated students were 10 years old, they were not aware of sharing their thoughts and experiences with others. They might feel shy, reserved, and did not want to tell their story. In contrast, there were several students who shared their thoughts, feelings and learning experiences in the reflective journals, as in one student's journal:

"... I like the song I learn today, it was very good. However, I don't like working in group because we are very slow and we don't have stickers...". (Figure 2)

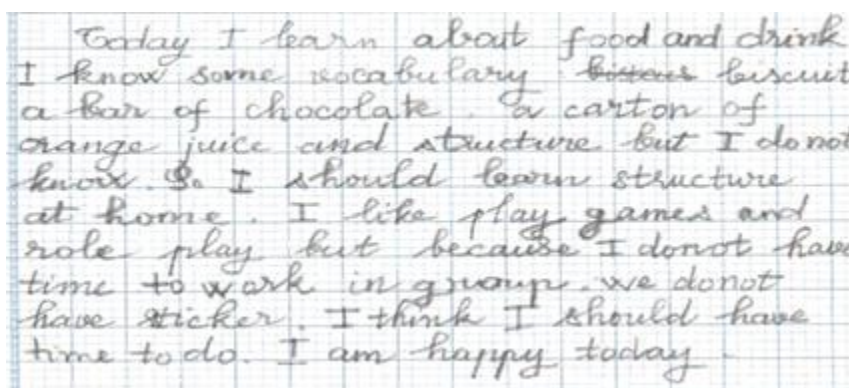


Figure 2: Example of a student's reflective journal

In their reflective journals, even though they misspelled new words, wrongly used the tenses, or had words written in Vietnamese, the students stated what they liked or disliked, sharing their thoughts on how they studied or participated in the activities.

Helping Students to Communicate with Teachers

Table 4 shows that the students were generally in agreement about the benefit of reflective journals helping students to communicate with teachers.

Table 4: Communication between students and teachers through reflective journals

Statement	M	SD	Frequency			
			Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
6. The teacher helped me out with the parts I was weak at based on what I wrote in my reflective journal.	2.89	0.85	4 (8.9%)	7 (15.6%)	24 (53.3%)	10 (22.2%)
7. The teacher adjusted the lessons to suit my wishes in reflective journals.	2.93	0.83	3 (6.7%)	8 (17.8%)	23 (51.1%)	11 (24.4%)

Both of the two statements "The teacher helped me out with the parts I was weak at based on what I wrote in my reflective journal" and "The teacher adjusted the lessons to suit my wishes in reflective journals" had a high rate of 75.5% in agreement while the opposite opinion was 24.5%. This means that reflective journal writing becomes one of the convenient ways for students to communicate with their teachers. Figure 3 shows a student's journal that demonstrated help by the teacher.

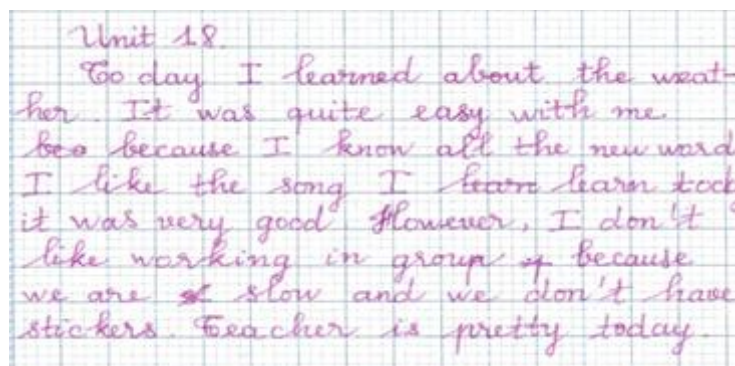


Figure 3: Example of a student's reflective journal

In the journal example (Figure 3), the student mentioned the things which she liked (*games and role-playing activities*) or she did not like (*not having much time to work in groups with friends*), and also the points she needed to improve (*the structure*). This was apparently an effective way for the teacher to know the student's learning progress, her strengths or weaknesses; the teacher could help and encourage the students to learn and improve her learning. In addition, thanks to knowing the points that the student was not pleased with (*have not had much time for group activities*), the teacher improved and applied friendly and effective teaching methods (*more time for group activities for the student*), which helped her have a better learning environment. By writing down their thoughts and experiences, the students were able to communicate with the teacher even they did not have time to talk in class, which helped the teacher to know her students' learning. Accordingly, the teacher adjusted effective strategies and helped the students in their learning.

The Students' Attitudes towards Reflective Journal Writing

This section describes the results answering the research question about the students' attitudes towards reflective journal writing.

Table 5: Students' attitudes towards reflective journal writing

Statement	M	SD	Frequency			
			Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
11. Reflective journal is easy to use.	2.78	2.78	3 (6.7%)	12 (26.7%)	22 (48.9%)	8 (17.8%)
12. I would like to share with my class what I wrote in my journal	2.31	2.31	8 (17.8%)	18 (40.0%)	16 (35.6%)	3 (6.7%)
13. I think it is helpful for my study.	2.71	2.71	5 (11.1%)	11 (24.4%)	21 (46.7%)	8 (17.8%)
14. I want to continue to write reflective journals in the future.	2.91	2.91	3 (6.7%)	11 (24.4%)	18 (40.0%)	13 (28.9%)

The items under this category got a very high rating as revealed in Table 5. This means that students had positive attitudes towards reflective journal writing. Furthermore, 48.9% of them strongly agreed and 17.8% agreed that reflective journals are easy to use. This was confirmed in the interviews, as in the following extracts:

I8: *"I find that writing reflective journals is very easy. At first, when I heard about writing a reflective journal, I thought it was very difficult because I didn't think to have any idea. However, thanks to the writing sample that the teacher let us try, I have more ideas to write in my reflective journal next time."*

I10: *"I think it is not difficult to write a reflective journal because I can freely write what I like or dislike; share about my English class or about my feelings and report my activities during class. Even if I make grammar mistakes or forget vocabulary, I will not afraid that my teacher will scold or give me a low mark."*

These comments indicated that the students enjoyed the experience of reflective journal writing and thus they did not consider it to be a waste of time. Also, reflective journals' writing was a good way for them to improve their learning. This is because "reflection is a meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next with a deeper understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas. It is the thread that makes continuity of learning possible and ensures the progress of the individual. One student shared his experiences about reflective journals:

I7: *"I think it's really useful for me, I can review what I've learned before, which helps me remember the lesson more easily. Besides, if I forget some parts such as structures or vocabulary, the teacher will also know and help me review and explain them."*

Because of the important benefits that writing reflective journals brought to the students, they viewed it as a worthwhile learning experience and thus it should be continued. There are 28.9% of the students agreed and 40.0% strongly agreed with the statement "*I want to continue to write reflective journals in the future*". Nevertheless, about more than 30% of the students did not want to continue the work of writing reflective journals due to doing a large amount of homework, preparing new lessons and taking extra lessons. In addition, it was quite difficult for students to share what they wrote with their friends. Nearly 60% of the students did not want to share their journals. One participant elaborated in the following extract:

I2: *"I don't like sharing my reflective journals with others because of my private. Besides, I evaluate the work of some friends in my journal, I am afraid that they will not be satisfied if they read it."*

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study contribute to the limited literature on the advantages of reflective journal writing for primary school students. They confirmed the results of previous studies in the literature. Firstly, the first benefit of helping students improve their knowledge has been determined in several studies. In their purest form, learning journal entries reflect students' thinking processes (Hubbs & Brand, 2005) and assist them in building context, transforming their approach to learning from memorizing information to a transformed and more thoughtful and analytical approach (Pavlovich et al., 2009). Students' sense of ownership and understanding of learning, as well as the encouragements of deep rather than surface learning, have all been proposed as advantages of using learning journals. Furthermore, the research of Bisman (2011) showed that reflective journals can improve content knowledge and develop reflective skills. According to Gulwadi (2009), reflective writing "is seen as being particularly useful when students are integrating new concepts as it helps them to contextualize their learning" (p.98).

Secondly, the research results indicated that reflective journals help students understand and evaluate their own learning. This is consistent with similar findings in the literature. Anderson (2012) reported that the reflective journal acted as an instrument for the encouragement of "reflection, criticism, and self-analysis of students" (p.622). It also "becomes an opportunity to reflect on oneself and also on one's relationships with the others. Reflecting on experience becomes reflecting in the experience: in this way, the experience of the journals becomes an experience of emotional, critical and reflective relationships with the others" (Bagnato et al., 2013, p.103). Other studies showed that reflective journals can be used as an effective tool for reflection as well as an evaluation of critical reflection (Gursansky et al., 2010). For example, Gursansky et al. (2010) used an online journal to investigate students' ability to reflect on their learning process. The findings indicated that reflective journals were accepted as an "authentic learning tool with life-long applicability"(p.778). Moreover, Anderson (2012) used reflective journals to evaluate postgraduate students' reflection, critique and self-analysis through focus ethnic groups. The findings showed that reflective journals could offer a useful opportunity not only to enhance student learning but also to secure genetic advances in critical analysis and deep learning.

Thirdly, reflective journaling is a way for students to share their experiences, thoughts and feelings. This finding is in agreement with Graham's study (2003), where she found that reflective journal writing develops confidence and competence among learners. Also, reflective learning journals were meaningful learning experiences for learners. Reflective journal writing was considered as the bridge of thought, feeling, and action (Lukinsky, 1990) or the expression of sentiments concerning clinical practice, as well as the development of observational skills (Callister, 1993). Furthermore, Atkins and Murphy (1994) identified reflective journals as "awareness of uncomfortable feelings and thoughts, critical analysis of feelings and knowledge, and a new perspective (p.51)". That means students can share their feelings, whether positive or negative, about the lesson. Through reflective journal writing, students become conscious of their thoughts, positions, and feelings in connection to the learning process and the learning community (Farabaugh, 2007).

Last but not least, the research findings proved that reflective journal writing was a bridge between teachers and students. Similar findings (Dunlap, 2006) showed that reflective journals writing can provide "an opportunity for instructors to hear the voice of student teachers through the chance given to them to express the thoughts and changes they experience as a part of their learning experience" (p.24). Phelps (2005) asserted that "the journals are an important means for the collection of data in qualitative research about the students" (p.41). The data of the reflective journals, she believed, offered important observations that are not often obtained by other methods of data collection. Spalding and Wilson (2002) also maintained that reflective journal writing is important for students as it acts as a daily diary of thoughts and experiences, establishes and maintains a relationship with the facilitator and supports internal dialogue in their studies.

In addition to the findings related to the benefits of reflective journals, the research indicated that the students' attitudes towards reflective journals were positive. Most of the students found reflective journals were easy to use and they wanted to continue writing them in the future because of their benefits. This is in agreement with Park (2003) whose study showed that "most students recorded that they felt that this was a useful thing to do, valuable to them in a number of important ways" (p.195). Similarly, Williams (2008) found that most of the students in her study liked to continue using reflective journals. The findings of the research contradict those of Park (2003) who found in his study that a recurrent theme in many journal entries was the difficulty of the task and Sen (2010) who claimed reflective learning journals to be highly demanding and time-consuming. One interesting point of the findings is that not all of the students wanted to share what they wrote in their journals with the rest of the class. It corresponds with the finding by O'Connell's and Dymont (2006), indicating that their students "have repeatedly expressed their reluctance to reflect honestly and deeply if they are concerned about the trustworthiness of the reader" (p.680). Also, Epp (2008) revealed that "students might choose to keep writing superficially if they have reason to believe that the reader does not create a safe space for their deep thoughts, ideas, and reflections" (p.1386).

CONCLUSION

The current study was an attempt to investigate the benefits of using reflective journals in teaching English to primary school students and the students' attitudes towards this kind of assessment. Four main benefits were identified including helping students gain their personal knowledge, evaluate their own learning process, share their experiences and express their thoughts and feelings as well as communicate easily with their teachers. Additionally, most of the students had a positive attitude towards reflective journal writing. They found reflective journals to be easy to use and wanted to continue writing them in the future. Nevertheless, there were some students who did not like to write reflective journals because of performing time-consuming tasks, doing large amounts of homework, preparing new lessons and taking extra lessons. They also did not want to share what they wrote in the journal with their friends due to privacy.

The research findings support the use of reflective journals in English classes for primary school students. In order to encourage students to keep long-term reflective journals, teachers need to be patient and creative. They need to form their students' habit of journaling through games, put reflective journals into a formative form of assessment, wholeheartedly instruct, explain and help them in journal writing. Also, teachers should reply to what the students write in their journals and support them in overcoming their weaknesses. In addition, they need to

create a friendly and comfortable atmosphere for their students to easily express their thoughts and experiences after each lesson.

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