

A Quantitative Descriptive Analysis of EFL 7th-Semester Students' Reflective Writing Levels at the University of Tripoli, Libya

Harb, Fatma Elhadi * 

Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Languages, university of Tripoli, Libya

fat.harb@uot.edu.ly

ABSTRACT

Keywords:

EFL students,
Kember et al.'s reflective
thinking,
Libyan context,
Reflective writing levels,
University of Tripoli

This quantitative descriptive study evaluates the reflective writing performance of 48 EFL 7th semester students at the University of Tripoli, Libya. Data are collected through a reflective essay and analyzed using descriptive statistics following Kember et al.'s (2008) reflective writing framework, which gauges reflectivity within four categories of critical reflection (A: 80-100%), reflection (B: 70-79%), understanding (C: 60-69%) and habitual action/non-reflection (D>60%). Findings exhibit that 68.75% of students' reflective performance falls into the non-reflection category, indicating difficulties in developing ideas, structuring essays, understanding topics and integrating personal experiences with academic context. The study recommends instructors incorporate reflective writing using traditional and electronic techniques.

تحليل وصفي كمي لمستويات الكتابة التأملية لطلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الفصل السابع في
جامعة طرابلس، ليبيا

فاطمة الهادي حرب

المخلص

الكلمات المفتاحية:
التفكير التأملي لكيمبر وآخرين،
السياق الليبي،
مستويات الكتابة التأملية،
جامعة طرابلس،
طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة
أجنبية

تُقيم هذه الدراسة الوصفية الكمية أداء الكتابة التأملية لدى 48 طالباً وطالبة في الفصل الدراسي السابع من تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بجامعة طرابلس في ليبيا. وقد جُمعت البيانات من خلال مقال تأملي وجرى تحليلها باستخدام الإحصاءات الوصفية استناداً إلى إطار عمل "كيمبر" وآخرين للكتابة التأملية لسنة 2008. الذي يقيس مستوى التأمل ضمن أربع فئات: التأمل النقدي (أ: 80-100%)، والتأمل (ب: 70-79%)، والفهم (ج: 60-69%)، والفعل المعتاد/ أو غياب التأمل (د: أقل من 60%). وأظهرت النتائج أن 68.75% من أداء الطلاب في الكتابة التأملية يقع ضمن فئة "غياب التأمل"، مما يشير إلى وجود صعوبات في تطوير الأفكار، وهيكلة المقالات، وفهم الموضوعات، ودمج التجارب الشخصية مع المحتوى الأكاديمي. وتوصي الدراسة بأن يدمج المعلمون ممارسة الكتابة التأملية في التدريس باستخدام تقنيات تقليدية وإلكترونية.



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Introduction

Reflective writing (RW) is a distinct writing genre that focuses on student reflections and assessments of personal experiences (Naseem & Rana, 2025 ; Kosmidou & Sfyroera, 2023). It is widely recognized for its contributions to bolstering students' lifelong Learning and professional development (Dean et al., 2026; Harvey et al., 2025). In practice, RW underscores the internal conversations that students have when they evaluate the outputs of the learning processes (Abroug, 2024). This is done via increasing students' dynamic learning and self-awareness, developing their writing abilities, fostering their reflection sharing and comprehending reflective practice (Naseem & Rana, 2025 ; Kosmidou & Sfyroera, 2023; Abubaker & El-Badri, 2022). Additionally, it encourages students to reflect on their behavior in real-life situations, helps them set individualized goals and plans to upgrade their language learning (Gallagher, 2018) and eventually maximizes their employability chances (Ross et al., 2024). These benefits are primarily due to the objectivity of RW and its creation of a safe space for students to consider their competencies and deficiencies (Wegner et al., 2017), which is essential for promoting students' constant learning processes, integrating their knowledge and gradually changing their opinions and behaviors (Lim et al., 2023; Quinn, 2020).

RW can shift the focus from rote memorization to the development of critical thinking (Tola Chala et al., 2025; Moore, 2024), metacognition (Wettstein et al., 2026; Zhai et al., 2023), along with learning incentive and macro-micro-level language competence (Baresh, 2022) in education. Hence, during the reflective process, students need to activate their exploratory and active learning skills to manage reflective learning, find alternative approaches to problems and produce new ideas while they maintain critical reflection (Sudirman et al., 2024). Besides, they are required to assess the learning process by involving their feelings, ideas and views throughout their academic careers (Inaayah & Fithriani, 2024). These actions demand that students recount particular experiences and examine them conducting critical and analytical analyses, by including their emotional reactions, thinking about future consequences and planning through a repetitive process (Kamimoto et al., 2026; Ahmed, 2024). When students embrace reflective practice with a sense of inquisitiveness, the outcomes of their reflections can unlock creativity (Pendrey, 2022) and enhance critical thinking by allowing them to assess

their learning journeys (Ma et al., 2026; Inaayah & Fithriani, 2024), connect real-world experiences with academic knowledge and develop self-awareness (Kamarulzaman & Ibrahim, 2026; Tola Chala et al., 2025). Such exercises help students link their educational experiences with higher-order thinking competencies (Sudirman et al., 2024) and consequently, reframe reflection as a self-motivated discussion that fosters deep research and practice rather than a mere description of experiences (Quinn, 2020).

Teachers use RW as a summative evaluation technique to assess academic achievement and student learning (Ma et al., 2026; Ross et al., 2024). In this regard, teachers have to cultivate reflection as a mode of thinking in their students' minds and discuss with them the assessment criteria and the elements of reflection, like critical thinking, writing fluency and self-understanding (Chan et al., 2021). In addition, teachers need to raise students' awareness of the various reflective abilities, processes and types to avoid any cognitive gaps (Ramlal & Augustin, 2020). In pursuit of this, teachers should refrain from imposing unnecessary pressure on students and encourage them to be open and honest when giving and sharing their reflections (Inaayah & Fithriani, 2024; Hudriyah, 2022). For teachers to benefit from reflective practice, they have to judge their teaching practices and principles (Kosmidou & Sfyroera, 2023; Artioli et al., 2021) and enhance their knowledge in teaching methods (Moore, 2024). This requires teachers to join training workshops, reflect on their actions and consider their feelings and experiences (McCormick, 2023). Moreover, teachers have to avoid establishing a controlled classroom culture, become reflective educators, participate in continuous critical reflection and cultivate a self-motivated learning environment (Silver et al. 2023). Essentially, writing incorporates a spectrum of genres that vary substantially in their focus and aim, like creative writing, academic writing, RW and more (Harb et al., 2022). Within the Libyan EFL context, students encounter many writing difficulties (Alashab, 2026; Arigall & Mohsen, 2026), most of which are due to linguistic obstacles relating to their past learning experiences (Algwil et al., 2022) and cohesion and coherence issues (Alashab, 2026). Therefore, students tend to accomplish inadequate advancement in their writing proficiency (Bakori, 2026; Baresh, 2022). Yet, Aljheme (2025) confirms that Libyan EFL undergraduates frequently exhibit habits, such as pre-writing planning and post-writing reflective evaluation of their assignments. Thus, this study is

set to assess students' RW levels. This is stimulated by the fact that RW has evolved into a reliable assessment tool for cognitive and metacognitive skills and that it remains an evolving domain that garners significant scholarly interest in education (Ma et al., 2026). Nevertheless, RW within the Libyan higher education system remains under-researched. To address this gap, the current study is guided by the following research question:

What are the RW levels of Libyan EFL 7th semester students at the Faculty of Arts and Languages, University of Tripoli, Libya?

Literature review

Several study findings accentuate how the use of RW in language teaching and learning programs enhances students' critical thinking, writing abilities and academic excellence. For instance, the study outcomes of Abrouq (2024) highlight that reflective journal writing is an effective strategy to improve EFL MA students' reflective thinking in higher education in Morocco, since it encourages students to engage in deeper cognitive processes and make connections between lectures and personal experiences, leading to better academic and professional consequences. In the same vein, the study outputs of Ferreira (2026) demonstrate that using portfolios as rigorous reflective assessment tools turns students' academic and practical experiences into fruitful educational gains, by making them examine, logically reconstruct and express their ideas to meet their university grading requirements. Likewise, the study findings of Maneepakhathorn (2023) identify that students who write in reflective dialogue journals (RDJWs) report lengthier entries and better idea communication. They expound that for EFL graduate students, RDJWs function as useful tools for two-way communication between students and their instructors, advancing students' writing fluency and raising their self-awareness of their own learning and writing development.

The study outcomes of Bashir and Gull (2025) stress that structured RW assignments function as perfect instruments for assessing students' analytical maturity, since it moves their reflections from simple, habitual reporting into advanced phases of critical analysis and evaluation. Similarly, the study findings of Abubaker and El-Badri (2022) report that utilizing digital storytelling (DST) as a reflective procedure for the comprehension of short stories in the Libyan context reinforces students' critical thinking abilities, evidencing that learning and reflection are

inseparable, where promoting higher-level reflection aids to ameliorate students' learning outcomes. In the same line, the study outputs of Macías and Dack (2023) show that writing reflective diaries affects positively the writing abilities of EFL university students and advances their English proficiency. This can be due to the constructive attitude students develop towards the use of a certain reflective method, as displayed by the study findings of Iman et al. (2024), where Pakistani students perceive that reflective learning helps them achieve better academic outcomes. By the same token, the study findings of El-Badri and Abu-baker (2021) emphasize that applying self-reflection worksheets greatly develops students' grasp of literary texts. They add that this tactic inspires students to amend their understanding of a story during a subsequent reading, leads them to cognize their own fortes and deficiencies, ultimately strengthening their communication skills and promoting their self-directed learning.

Again, the study conclusions of Abd El-Aziz (2023) contend that a RW task enhances the writing performance and critical thinking abilities of secondary school students. In the same line, the study outcomes of Solis Trujillo et al. (2025) highlight how reflective assessment activities in contemporary higher education go well beyond gauging the retention of fundamental knowledge. They affirm that such tasks are used to measure strong, high-level skills, including critical thinking, independent self-control and the capacity to express profound conceptual comprehension. In this regard, Gadsby (2022) establishes a link between RW and writing competency in which students can create texts with both linguistic and non-linguistic elements at a profound level of contemplation. Sudirman et al. (2024) add that these elements contribute to the practice of effortful RW skills and boost students' enthusiasm to continue writing reflective essays. Hence, Day et al. (2022) maintain that additional instruction on these foundations is a must, as it informs students that RW requires significant assessments and adjustments, allowing them to provide professional re-evaluation, peer review and self-evaluation. Besides, Sudirman et al. (2024) stress the application of RW tasks in classrooms while focusing on cooperation, critical thinking abilities, deep learning and feedback, because this can improve students' academic performance, self-reflection, decision-making, appreciation of diverse cultures, shared beliefs and values and problem-solving techniques.

The integration of RW in EFL classrooms is grounded in theoretical frameworks that highlight its capacity to enhance personal growth, critical inquiry and linguistic proficiency. Central to this is Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, which posits that learning occurs through the transformation of experience into critical analysis. This aligns with Dewey's (1933) Theory of Reflective Thought, which frames reflective thinking as an element for personal development, too. Furthermore, Vygotsky' (1978) Socio-cultural theory, emphasizes that language utilization and social interaction serve as essential mediators of cognitive development. Collectively, these frameworks establish that RW fosters advanced cognitive and linguistic growth by compelling students to critically evaluate their experiences, engage in structured introspection and internalize the target language.

Methodology

Study design

This study employs a quantitative descriptive approach. This approach relies on the collection, analysis and formulation of a conclusion using numerical data (Bouchrika, 2026). It also pinpoints a research problem by examining patterns and developments in the field or targeting the primary causes of a specific phenomenon by producing and interpreting information based on verified facts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Sampling and participants

The study employs the convenience sampling technique, which is a subset of non-probability sampling. Researchers adopt this method to gather data from a readily accessible population to optimize time and resource limitations (Giri, 2024). Yet, researchers need to be watchful of the drawbacks of convenience sampling, such as its inadequate capacity to represent wider populations and the imminent danger of bias (Sharma, 2026; Amini Farsani & Barzegar, 2025). Participants comprise 48 full-time, registered seventh-semester students (36 females, 75%; 12 males, 25%) aged between 20 and 26 years. The participants are enrolled in the Department of English Language at the Faculty of Arts and Languages, University of Tripoli. The study is conducted during the 2026 Spring semester.

Data collection

This study capitalizes on student-written reflective essays as a means for data collection. The practice of written reflections is a typical method for assessing students' grasp of concepts, analytical abilities and competency to communicate their ideas (Ferreira, 2026; Solis Trujillo et al., 2025). Ultimately, this practice permits instructors to spot a perceptible development in students' critical thinking and metacognition (Kamarulzaman, 2026; Bashir & Gull, 2025). Students are required to answer a RW question for the final examination.

Data analysis procedure

The study researcher utilizes a Quantitative Content Analysis (QCA) to assess students' RW performance in a post-writing test. QCA is an empirical and objective method intended to compute and analyze the frequency and connections among particular words, themes and concepts within a set of data, such as texts, images or audios (Palvia & Matta, 2024; Parry, 2020). The analysis in the current study is based on a four-category scheme rubric adapted from Kember et al. (2008), as shown in Table 1. Descriptive statistics in the form of percentages is run to present the obtained data in a clear layout (Fulk, 2023).

Table 1: Scheme adaptation of Kember et al. (2008) for evaluating RW

Levels of reflection		Elucidations
1	Critical reflection (80%-100%)	Students' essays show reflection on existing knowledge demonstrated in change of viewpoints about crucial concepts and development of original viewpoints, due to the new experience. These essays greatly link to academic concepts obtained from previous experiences and lectures.
2	Reflection (70%-79%)	Students' essays go beyond what has been studied in lectures to include discussions of personal encounters where students form new understandings of knowledge owing to this experience. These essays clearly connect to academic concepts where experiences and lectures are augmented.

3	Understanding (60%-69%)	Students' essays exhibit evidence of topic understanding that depends on what has been studied in lectures and lacks connections to personal experiences leading to a limited understanding of a particular topic. These essays link to academic concepts where experiences and lectures are augmented, yet continue to be shallow and vague.
4	Non-reflection (>60%)	Students' essays display no evidence of topic understanding. They are mostly reproduced without conscious reference to existing knowledge and without drawing connections between experiences and lectures, thus resulting in the failure of developing new experiences.

Data analysis and discussion

Table 2 displays students' reflective essay writing levels and illustrates how they perform within the indicators of the four-category scheme of Kember et al. (2008).

Table 2: Students' overall RW performance levels

Levels of reflection		Frequency of occurrences in 48 essays	Percentages
1	Critical reflection (80%-100%)	6	12.5%
2	Reflection (70%-79%)	4	8.33%
3	Understanding (60%-69%)	5	10.42%
4	Non-reflection (>60%)	33	68.75%
Total 48		100%	

As demonstrated in Table 2, the nuanced QCA of students' reflective essays uncovers the prevalence of non-reflection cases, which represents 68.75% of the collected essays compared with other reflective categories, including occurrences of critical reflection, which constitute 12.5% of total essays, occasions of reflection, that appear in 8.33% of students' essays and instances of understanding, that are present in 10.41% of the total essays. The higher ratio of non-reflective essays exhibits students' lack of topic understanding, unawareness of existing knowledge and a setback in their abilities to produce and develop new experiences. Also, it shows students' failure to establish connections between experiences and what they study in lectures.

The obtained result diverges from the study findings of Abrouq (2024), which emphasize the efficacy of reflective journal writing in cultivating EFL students' reflective thinking, deepening their engagement in cognitive processes and enhancing their academic and professional performance, as a result of establishing connections between lectures and personal experiences. Basically, participants have never engaged in RW, so this output is inconsistent with the study outcomes of Bashir and Gull (2025), which confirm that students' undertaking of structured RW tasks elevates their reflections from basic descriptions to more sophisticated levels of critical analysis and judgement.

To elaborate, the high presence of non-reflection in students' reflective essays can offer some justifications about the status quo of RW in the Libyan higher educational system. First, it can be owing to the fact that the study participants see RW as a difficult task, which necessitates them to have self-regulated learning skills to properly plan, promptly engage and fully reflect on their learning experiences (Suraworachet et al., 2023). This can be ascribed to the intricacy of RW, which makes students produce performative reflections rather than genuine ones, casting doubt on the usefulness of RW as a tool for evaluation (Ross et al., 2024; Mercieca, 2022). Second, perhaps some students perceive reflection as a vague activity (Tan, 2021), causing them to perform reflective tasks in superficial ways (Humphreys & Hirschel, 2025). Third, less motivated students cannot participate in reflective practice, since it increases their workload (Kövesi et al., 2024), rendering them to produce poor reflections and be less interactive with the writing process (Ross et al., 2024). Finally, this can relate to the neglect of RW in writing classes on the part of teachers

who may find it challenging to integrate reflective practice into their lessons if rigid curricula restrict the flexibility required for RW (Jemadi et al., 2023) and if they are unfamiliar with models for assessing RW (Hashim et al., 2023).

The obtained output calls for Libyan teachers to use diverse applicable strategies in writing classrooms, such as reflective paper accounts, portfolios and diaries. These techniques can convert personal insights into practice-relevant lessons, promote self-evaluation and encourage discussion and shared learning among students (Ahmed, 2024). Additionally, some research indicates that e-portfolios can support students' professional development, digital literacy and reflective skills outside the classroom (Ferreira, 2026; Zainuddin et al., 2026). For instance, there are significant improvements in students' overall reflective thinking at different levels of reflection after using G-Keep as a system of student-educator feedback (Guising et al., 2026).

Tracking undergraduates' development of reflectivity should be done over the course of a semester, so as to offer concrete proof of students' metacognitive awareness, analytical ability and cognitive progress (Kamarulzaman, 2026). Notably, students who consistently reflect on a weekly basis and receive feedback from peers and teachers perform better academically and are encouraged to reflect more (Suraworachet et al., 2023). Not only this, but students' participation in reflective journal writing assignments makes reflective cognition visible, allowing both students and their teachers to assess learning outcomes (Abrouq, 2024) and fosters students' accountability and self-mastery abilities, essential for independent learning and enhanced writing fluency (Aliyu et al., 2023). This is because students who utilize reflective journals feel more at ease expressing their thoughts at their own pace without worrying about making mistakes (Maneepakhathorn, 2023). Likewise, some study findings advocate using reflective diaries in writing classes (Kamarulzaman & Ibrahim, 2026; Naseem & Rana, 2025). These diaries offer a structured environment for students to participate in critical and metacognitive reflection, make connections between theoretical knowledge and personal experience and improve higher-order thinking skills (Chulan et al., 2025), through finding successful learning strategies (Naseem & Rana, 2025).

What is more, students' RW is likely to be enhanced by reading portfolios,

receiving constructive feedback (Tsao, 2025) and using computer-based mind mapping, which prove to promote EFL students' RW, self-regulation, higher-order cognitive presence and introspection compared to conventional approaches (Abrouq, 2022). In doing so, teachers can scaffold students' reflection with prompts in the form of guiding questions and RW samples to improve the quality of the produced reflections (Porta, 2026; Wettstein et al., 2026; Cai et al., 2026). Additionally, teachers can adopt different reliable reflective models to boost and test students' reflective abilities (Hashim et al., 2023), like Gibbs' reflective cycle, Kolb's experiential learning cycle, Kember's reflective thinking model Driscoll's model and Bloom's taxonomy. Teachers must also help students understand how reflection affects critical thinking and results in the production of satisfactory reflections (Yeh et al., 2023). This rests on students' receiving of formal feedback, engaging in multi-phase drafting and reflective revision (Hyland & Hyland, 2019) and having enough time to write, reflect and assess their work (Aljheme, 2025).

Conclusion

The assessment of EFL 7th semester students' RW in the current study provides crucial empirical insights into the pedagogical implementation of this practice within Libyan higher education and indicates the predominance of non-RW. Presently, RW remains relatively underemphasized in the Libyan EFL context. Consequently, a substantial number of participants in the current study exhibit a lack of familiarity with the RW genre, resulting in underdeveloped RW performance. These insights infer that unless institutional curricula are upgraded to systematically introduce RW, students will face persistent challenges in writing proficiency. This underscores an urgent need for targeted pedagogical interventions and institutional support systems designed to cultivate a culture of reflection in Libyan EFL classrooms and elevate the overall quality of writing instruction.

Moreover, this approach requires sustained student support through continuous guidance, formative feedback and regular reflective workshops designed to scaffold students' introspective skills. Also, the study finding highlights a critical need to upgrade educators' pedagogical competencies in designing, implementing and assessing reflective tasks. This demands institutional stakeholders to establish professional development training

programs to prepare instructors to foster a robust culture of reflection effectively.

The study has some limitations. First, data are drawn from one group of students selected non-randomly, where findings cannot be generalized to similar EFL contexts. To address this constraint, it is recommended that future research should recruit random participant groups from different universities in Libya for further examination of RW levels. Moreover, future research should adopt true experimental research designs, employing control and experimental groups to track longitudinal progress across multiple semesters in Libyan universities. Second, this study exclusively evaluates students' RW levels without implementing interventions, such as digital or offline reflective journaling techniques. Given that reflective capabilities may be moderated by individual dispositions, linguistic proficiency and writing self-efficacy, subsequent studies should utilize mixed-methods approaches to explore the impact of RW on critical thinking dispositions. Additionally, further investigation is needed to examine how peer and teacher feedback mechanisms (both face-to-face and digital) foster students' creativity and higher-order cognitive practices across varying academic classes.

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