

## **Reflective Writing in an ESP Classroom: Student-Perceived Impacts**

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**Abstract:** *Productive written communication in English is one of the most valuable assets for professional growth and development in the 21st century. However, writing is reportedly one of the biggest challenges that many ESP students face in spite of the recognized importance of English as one of the major languages of higher education. This paper explores reflective writing practice integrated in the project component of various ESP courses offered at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, and its student-perceived impacts on meeting their needs, and equipping them with required knowledge and skills. The impacts were examined by analyzing the continuous and post-project student reflections that inquired about their self-perceived views on the process of project development, skills developed, challenges faced and potential solutions. The students were asked to particularly focus on their involvement in research and teamwork, related experiences and skills' development. The results show that reflective writing assignments contribute to developing new insights and perspectives in terms of linguistic advancement in English, enhancement of written communication, and abilities to describe, analyze and evaluate individual performance and make accurate conclusions. Such practice might help in building learning experiences that boost students' abilities to interact in writing, think critically and analytically, and map individual progress.*

**Keywords:** *reflective writing; English for Specific Purposes (ESP); written communication; linguistic advancement; learning experience;*

### **Introduction**

The importance of English as one of the major languages of higher education is widely recognized. While acknowledging the role that English plays in higher education, scholars signify its multiple functions, including those as “a medium of instruction at universities in a large number of countries, a basic means of second language learning / teaching, an accessing source of modern knowledge and scientific research, and a means of global communication and earn living” (Al-Khalil 123). Related is the function of English as a language of future employability and new career opportunities. For example, Niyozova (22) asserts that “knowing English increases your chances of getting a good job in a multinational company”, and productive written communication in English still remains one of the top commonly reported required employability skills, and one of the most valuable assets for professional growth and development in the 21st century. This paper explores reflective

writing practice integrated in the project component of various ESP courses offered at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, and its student-perceived impacts on meeting their needs, and equipping them with required knowledge and skills. The impacts were examined by analyzing the continuous and post-project student reflections that inquired about their self-perceived views on the process of project development, skills developed, challenges faced and potential solutions

### **The challenge of writing in EFL**

Writing is reportedly one of the biggest challenges that many ESP students face (Moses, Mohamad). Nadera (5), for example, contends that “ESP students need more improvement on English language proficiency and language use”. Irrespective of discipline, writing is an important skill for reasons that are academic, professional and for personal growth (Hyland; Nunan; Lee). It is a skill that goes beyond the academic context and is a real world application that can impact personal and professional advancement. Manchón differentiated ‘learning to write’ and ‘writing to learn’ as two complementary paths to writing within EFL, with the previous strategy being specifically targeted at acquiring writing skills and the latter being a way to learn content in an area-specific and authentic context. Manchón and de Larios (103) suggest that there is a “psycholinguistic rationale for the purported language learning potential of writing in instructed language contexts” and that much of this rationale is owed to “the problem-solving nature of composition”. This, in effect, prioritizes writing as a higher order skill that is transferrable and suitable across disciplines. In this sense ‘writing to learn’ continues to be a significant contributor to EFL student learning, as it is an important component of how language is learnt. This is applicable across disciplines, including in Business Studies where English is seen to be the most important language of communication (Tsai; Bacha, Bahous). An important focus of study in EFL writing is topic selection. Various studies have proved that students tend to write in a more organized and systematic way when asked to write on a topic which they had prior familiarity with (He, Shi; McDonough, Crawford). Criteria such as advanced use of the AWL (“The Academic Word List”) and more coherent writing was seen to be common among students who were asked to write about a generic topic rather than one which was too specific to a given context. Although there may be mixed results, overall, students who wrote discipline-specific essays were rater better in terms of organization, text length and range of vocabulary. It is in this context that reflective writing, which is the focus of this study, where students are writing about their own process of learning and doing, becomes relevant.

Reflection writing is part of the important shift in focus from product to process based learning, where students use multiple opportunities to draft their writings, often collaboratively, in an effort to achieve the desired outcomes. It grew out of “the dissatisfaction on the part of writing teachers with the traditional approach that had its primary emphasis on correct usage of grammar and style rather than helping students’ develop writing competence” among native language learners (Zen, 191). When linked to second or foreign language learning, the role of process was seen to be equally applicable. As long as learning is seen to be product based, language learning is limited to grammatical structures and accuracy rather than understanding and application of ideas. This process has been seen to improve student writing, especially within EFL contexts where learners are negotiating content which may be culturally foreign to them in a language in which they are developing proficiency.

### **Business English within EFL**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Business English is rapidly becoming one of the most important areas within EFL studies and research around issues of curriculum and pedagogy in specific geographical contexts becoming more relevant. This is also owing to the fact that the skills required for Business students are no longer limited to subject specific knowledge but include interdisciplinary skills like language usage. In a study by Tushar and Sooraksa (10), it was found that, among business students, basic numeracy skills were no longer enough for employment: “employers are not satisfied enough with graduates possessing occupation-specific skills in the 21st-century labor market. Some required skills by employers include emotional intelligence, leadership and integrity, critical thinking, adaptability, and creativity and innovation”. English language skills are paramount for Business students as that is the primary mode of communication. English is also important for purposes of job seeking, promotion and higher visibility in the market (Clement, Murugavel; Terauchi, Araki; Roshid, Kankaanranta). For example, in research based on a public university in Bangladesh, Roshid and Kankaanranta (19) conclude that “higher education needs to recognize this fact and prepare graduates with adequate specialized ECS [sic. English Communication Skills] relevant to both general and specific business sectors and with a solid competence in English required for their future career and professional tasks in local and global contexts”. Indeed, as claimed by Robertson et al. (6), “the future of work will require a more flexible, dynamic, and equitable system of preparation. A map of this system may look less like a highway and more like the iconic web of circles and intersections of the London Underground”. There is a need perceived by many to move beyond the traditional model of transmitting information and

knowledge to learners. How then can English for Business courses be made relevant and useful to prospective graduates and employers alike? In a related question, how can these essential skills be taught? One of the ways in which a process driven writing pedagogy operates is through reflective writing which, while engaging students with their own learning, also integrates the core English language skills, particularly writing, by making them apply ideas used throughout a teaching unit to provide feedback on their learning process.

This paper reports on a study that aimed to explore reflective writing practice integrated in the project component of various courses offered at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, within an EFL context, and its student-perceived impacts on meeting their academic and professional needs, and equipping them with required knowledge and skills. The specific focus was on English for Business students’-perceived effects of the reflective writing tasks of the problem based learning component on meeting their academic and professional needs, and equipping them with the required knowledge and skills.

This focus is based on the importance of 21st century educational thinking, demand driven education and planning (Joynes et al.) for future studies on the impact on students’ teaching and learning in the English for Business classroom. Recent discussions accentuate “the range of drivers identified with the increased demand for 21st century skills” (Joynes et al., 21) with internationalization being one of the key drivers of change within the economy and labor markets at the national level, and Oman is no exception. In Oman’s world of business, effective written communication in English is one of the most valuable professional skills for growth and development (Heckadon, Tuzlukova; Al-Riyami; Dauletova; Al Mahrooqi, Tuzlukova). However, writing is still one of the biggest challenges that Business students face in spite of the prominence of English as the leading language of business and business education. To exemplify, with reference to the perceived importance, the findings of the study by Heckadon and Tuzlukova indicate that business students in Oman place effective writing skills fairly high. However, students’ overall enjoyment level of writing was moderate to average. This is due to students’ self-perceived “lack in perspectives pertaining to how the writing tasks and assignments could be developed and implemented including providing more guiding writing practice, more feedback, more interesting topics and more real-world topics and tasks” in addition to “perceived challenges throughout learning” (Heckadon, Tuzlukova, 753). The suggested pedagogical solutions to this gap include use of technology to increase students’ exposure to the English language, setting relevant and interesting assignments which could be based on ground reports in Oman’s business setting, topics and tasks set using

authentic frameworks through which students learn actively and can view their writing as having real world implications (Al-Riyami). Other suggested solutions to improving writing skills among business students include increasing contact hours, introduction activities revolving around critical thinking as well as actually teaching more vocabulary (Uba & Souidi, 2020). In general, studies have found that Business English classes in Oman continue to use “traditional pedagogical practices that do not have the leverage to prepare students for challenging academic writing tasks at degree programs” (Naghdipour 1).

### **Reflective writing in EFL**

What about students’ reflections on their thoughts and feelings of their experience in learning English? According to Almabekova (465), “being the fundamental idea for one’s personal development, for a university student reflection development can go concurrently with his/her professional competence development”. In the same vein, Taylor (n.p.) notes that reflective writing tasks “can give students the opportunity to think more critically and carefully about the material presented in the course and to learn more about themselves—their learning strengths and weaknesses as well as progress made in the course”. Seen as a feature of student-centered learning, reflections are a way in which students can take ownership of their own academic progress, identifying gaps in learning, measures to be taken to alleviate such gaps, gauge future action as well as comment on associated challenges like classroom size, instructor proficiency and issues of time management (MacDonald; Prior, Lunsford). Reflections can be stand-alone pieces of individual writing (Kirk; Ono, Ichii; Resta et al.), collaborative oral, formal or informal presentations (Tuomainen), or in the form of portfolios (Farahian, Avarzamani, Rajabi).

An aspect of higher level thinking possible after an accomplishment of a given task, reflection is now a widely accepted element of learning across disciplines, including ELT [English Language Teaching]. It involves the process of learners knowing what they do know and what they need to know, as well as challenges and opportunities that may have come their way. First initiated in the works of Dewey (118) reflection was seen as an “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends”. It was further developed by Schön’s (1983) text, *The Reflective Practitioner*, which focused on the importance of documenting reflection and its practices. Anticipated as a next step after knowing and understanding, reflection is the interpretation of a learnt object or task linked to a learner’s own experiences (Farahian, Avarzamani, Rajabi). Kember et al. have appropriately divided reflection into various stages of

habitual action, understanding, reflection, and critical reflection. The role of reflection in learner's development is often not recognized, owing largely to a rigid curriculum, teacher led instruction and the conventional attribution given to teachers as the arbiter of knowledge, especially in some cultures (Ramlal, Augustin; Fraser et al.). Writing with a set of rules and criteria, students are rarely encouraged to understand their own process of writing, with the possibility of fixing and course correction in the case of their own learning objectives not being met (Ashraf, Samir, Tobatabaee-Yazdi). In this sense, a focus on reflection through writing can be seen to be an indispensable metacognitive skill that develops learners' understanding of their own learning process. Although reflection is useful even when it is oral and communicative, it is also more effective in a systemized format such as a portfolio or end of semester writing task. In this sense, reflective writing allows for a set of sub skills among EFL students that embrace the various elements of learning from understanding to thinking critically.

Sani, Kurniawati, and Nurwanti (331) claim that “writing represents individual's way of thinking, and “both writing and thinking could be practiced through reflective writing” that “facilitates the individual to sharpen general writing and writing reflection”. Reflection as evidence of reflective thought that focuses on a thought of past action, reaction towards the action, and the evaluation of the experience and reflective writing which the method of transmitting the experience is done through an advanced skill of writing has been examined in many studies (Hampton; Hatton, Smith; Monyanont; Svojanovský). The examination of the experiences of reflective practice with students in diverse educational contexts have proven the importance and effectiveness of reflective writing in affecting students' learning (Jindal-Snape, Holmes). While emphasizing the value of promoting reflection in relation to particular and situated learning tasks, Granville and Dison (99) claim that “by using their own voices in their reflections, students remain grounded in their existing identities and thus more easily make the transition from their everyday language use to the academic languages required at the University”. In Holec's view reflective writing promotes learner autonomy by helping students to think critically when they plan, monitor and evaluate their learning/instances of their learning, to revise their learned materials and to use their personal response to make the content meaningful to their learning. In Monyanont's opinion, reflective writing provides students with the tools to gain knowledge in the future. This corroborates with Taylor's (n.p.) perspective that “through reflecting on their learning, students are also given the opportunity to formulate goals for future improvement”. Taylor (n.p.) states that “due to their versatility, the reflective writing tasks ... can be implemented in various teaching contexts and adjusted depending on the nature of the course, the material presented in it, and the learner population”.

Although there is much work on reflective practices and their impact on the EFL learner in various parts of the world, such a focus within the Arabian Gulf is minimal. Alharbi, for example, follows three pre-service teachers in KSA (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) to focus on their reflections on the teacher training program based using such strategies as writing individually, corresponding with their mentors, as well as with their peers. Alharbi's (5) study concluded that "their biographies, backgrounds, previous learning experience, and attitudes all influenced their reflective journey to become English teachers", thus making reflection an important, if unique form of learning. Constantinou (2009) studied the reflective practices of six students of nursing in a college in the United Arab Emirates. In doing so, she also engaged in action research by practicing reflection herself in the process of studying the participants. Her findings were that these students had been introduced to reflective practices by her colleagues, peers and instructors, and that they were constantly involved in reflections on their own or in groups, and that reflecting on their learning experiences helped them to learn and improve on their learning processes. In Oman, although there are studies on the importance of English among Business Studies students, the role of reflection in facilitating English language learning is found wanting. This study fills this gap by examining reflective writing in the context of English for Business course 1 offered by the Centre for Preparatory Studies at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman.

### **The study - English for Business 1 course: Overview**

English for Business 1 course is one of the ESP courses designed by the Centre for Preparatory Studies at Sultan Qaboos University to prepare students for lifelong learning and give them exposure to academic reading and writing skills' development. Similar to other English for specific purposes courses offered by the Centre, English for Business 1 aims at preparing students 'to use English within academic, professional, or workplace environments' (Basturkmen, 17). Its purpose is to also "stimulate, develop and enhance competences and aptitudes which are imperative for recognition and acceptance of high value systems which in turn are expected to be characteristic for highly developed societies like the knowledge society towards which the open minded world has been actually heading today" (Popovska, Piršl, 43).

This course is offered for the first year business students of the College of Economics and Political Science (CEPS), and is integrative in its nature involving the skills of reading, listening, writing, and speaking through a range of readings. Based on an analysis of the needs of students, it aims to introduce students to the fundamentals of business English and to strengthen their' ability to understand a variety of business issues. It also

incorporates a problem based learning (PBL) component as an independent and group research work that aims to provide students with the necessary verbal and written communication skills for their field of study with a focus on how to improve the economy of the country and comprises three components: reflections, report, and presentation. The focus of this component is on the development of the key elements of team dynamics, research skills, reflective and research-report writing, presentation skills by promoting active learning and learner autonomy.

Popovska and Piršl (37) contend that “the ESP as a tertiary education subject can help the development as well as further support of a knowledge society value system by using strategies and methods that enhance both personal and professional growth of the learners”. As part of the tertiary curricula, the reflective writing assignments are developed and implemented in the PBL component of the English for Business course with the focus on such skills’ development as research, team work and time management skills. Three reflective writing assignments require students to examine their subjective thoughts and feelings about their problem-learning based project as well as their responses to new information, new experiences, and skill set development. The reflective writing assignments are designed in order to: identify students’ learning needs, improve their learning processes, make connections between current and future project work/professional practice, and for them to experience deepened learning, sharpen language and critical thinking skills, learn the process of integrating of new knowledge with previous knowledge and experiences.

### **Methodology**

The aim of the study was to investigate students’ self-perceived views about the reflections in the course PBL component, and whether they were useful for preparing them adequately to meet their academic and professional needs and equipping them with the required knowledge and skills. As emphasized in a study by Arokiaraj et al. (2713), “motivation, and self-belief, therefore, different types of external factors have a remarkable effect on the performance of academic sector”. The launch of the study was primarily determined by the need to understand students’ views and opinions about their reflective writing practice and whether this practice gives them greater exposure to skills’ development in the English for Business classroom since there is interdependence between students’ perceptions and students’ motivation. It was also important to identify classroom activities that are supportive in skill development and hear students’ comments on course improvement.

In this study, primarily qualitative data were collected based on the personal feedback of the students enrolled in English for Business 1 course



offered by the Centre for Preparatory Studies at Sultan Qaboos University. In more detail, in terms of reflective writing practice, students were asked to rate thirty-eight skill areas and how these skill areas are covered in the reflective writing practice, describe their ability to reflect in English and share their opinion on what the PBL component of the English for Business 1 course should have to support the acquisition of reflective writing skills among its students in an English questionnaire administered online using Google forms.

A monolingual English survey instrument was utilized for data collection. It comprised of questions about (a) student demographic information, including age, gender, specialization; (b) student self-perceived views on the reflections integrated into the course problem-based learning component, and whether these were useful for students' skill set development and enhancement with particular focus on the reflective writing assignments about their team work experiences, and research and time management skills' development; (c) student level of satisfaction in relation to how the reflective writing component has equipped them with the skills listed in the set; (d) student level of ability to reflect.

The sample size (n) of 91 students was used to ensure representativeness of the sample and statistical analysis of the data. The cross sectional sample represented a diverse student population. The gender statistics of the study population reveals that male study participants outnumbered female participants by 51.6% to 48.4%. The demographic analysis of the participants reveals that the age of the majority of the students who participated in the study is 19 years old (60,4%). The next largest age group comprised 18-year-old students (27.5%). Some small groups involved students who are 17, 20, 21, 22 and 23 years old. The specialty statistics reveals that the majority of the participants are planning to specialize in accounting (78%) in future. Other areas of specialization include business statistics, economics, finance, human resources, information technology, management, marketing, operations management. Only 2% of the participants had not yet made a decision or judgement about their future specialization, and were undecided.

### **Findings and Discussion**

In terms of reflective writing and skills' development, the results of the study show that the reflective writing tasks were extremely supportive in equipping students with research skills (32.4%), team work and collaboration skills (35.1%), social responsibility (32.4%), abilities to describe situations and experiences (43.2%), express feelings about situations and experiences (32.4%), evaluate (32.4%), express views and opinions (40.5%), analyze (37.8%), and paraphrase and restate other people's opinions (45,9%). The

reflections also equipped students well with critical thinking skills (45.9%), social skills (45.9%), time management skills (48.6%), effective written communication skills (writing legibly, logically and concisely)(44.4%), creativity (43.2%), and abilities to express ‘new ideas logically and clearly’ (56.8%), ‘see connections between experiences and learning’ (40.5%), ‘make observations about experiences and beliefs’(40,5%), ‘feel confident of the ability to communicate views and opinion‘ (41.7%). These results corroborate with Dewey’s (118) understanding of reflection as “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends”.

Taylor (58) believes that reflective writing tasks “can give students the opportunity to think more critically and carefully about the material presented in the course and to learn more about themselves - their learning strengths and weaknesses as well as progress made in the course”. The majority of participants of the study believe that reflective writing assignments were very important for their English language and soft skills enhancement. According to these study participants, reflections were ‘a great way to hone my soft skills alongside with language enhancement ‘and were ‘helpful to improve writing and critical thinking skills’. They helped students to “express what they were going through while doing the research project”, “analyze and express their experiences and enhanced their writing skills’, ‘use the new vocabulary they learnt’, “learn how to evaluate and analyze a situation/problem and make accurate conclusions’, and “express their feelings and views’.

As for student general comments on English for Business course improvement in relation to reflective writing skills’ acquisition among the students and students’ free-text responses that involved their comments and suggestions with regard to the course and its possible improvement as a data source, seventy responses in the English language were obtained. To analyze this portion of data text analyzer free software utility [<https://www.online-utility.org/text/analyzer.jsp>] allowing to find the most frequent phrases and frequencies of words, count number of words, characters, sentences and syllables, and calculate lexical density was used. The results indicate that most of the study participants describe their ability to reflect in English as “very good’ (45.6%), whereas 21.1% of study participants believe it is ‘excellent’, 27.8% describe it as ‘good’, 4.4% as ‘poor’, and 1.1% as very poor’.

In response to the question about student opinion on what activities English for Business course should have to support the acquisition of reflective writing skills among its students, a diverse response was obtained. The whole corpus of free-text responses as identified using Text Analyzer

[<https://www.online-utility.org/text/analyzer.jsp>] software comprised of 3487 characters (including spaces), 2861 characters (without spaces), 516 words. Some top phrases contained the following: tasks/activities in the student book, video resources, teaching materials, explanations and videos, in-class activities. The content of students' free text responses reveals that they appreciate the reflective writing practice design and delivery. Yet, they "frame on purpose" since similar to students in other educational contexts they want "to improve their career prospects" (Kandiko Howson, Mawer, 9). Students, as the research findings show, want more activities about how to reflect, explanation and video resources, reflection writing templates, reflection samples, and 'what to avoid' guidelines. These will help improve reflection skills among students by helping them to stay engaged in different activities and tasks as well discover their own role as learners. Also, adding digital sources for learning and doing is equally important, for, as explained by one study participant, 'In my personal opinion, videos are a great way of supporting reflective writing skills as we are a generation of visual learners'.

Multiple studies describe benefits that students' reflections have on students' skills enhancement and the effectiveness of the learning process (Taylor). The present study confirms the findings of researchers who find value in student reflection in terms of enhancing writing skills among students. As perceived by the study participants, there are a number of positive effects in relation to their language and soft skills enhancement:

'Reflections are beneficial. They help you to write your thoughts clearly. I think they improved my skills to analyze, write down the results and evaluate these results. I usually reflect on the different situations I face but this was the first time for me to write down my thoughts, and use the English language to describe what I think. That's why it was a language improving experience for me'.

'It definitely helped with improving my writing and critical thinking skills, especially after receiving feedback and noticing my mistakes so that I can do better next time'

'The reflective writing tasks were extremely important, they helped me develop my writing skills, and learn how to evaluate and analyze a situation/problem and make accurate conclusions'.

'It enhanced my ability to evaluate my performance throughout the course. Additionally, it developed my critical thinking on certain situations like meeting deadlines and being constantly proactive'.

Though the importance of reflective writing assignments for English language and soft skills enhancement was underscored by the majority of study participants, some of them described the impact as 'normal' or

‘mediocre as I don't really see the reason behind reflections’; others believed that ‘it wasn't that important’ and they just ‘learned a couple of things’. Similar responses were obtained in studies by Fernández-Peña et al. (64) who found that students’ primary concerns with reflection writing “related to unfamiliarity with the methodology, the written reflections, and privacy issues related to the reflective journal, as well as the evaluation criteria”. Dyke et al., similarly, found that reflection was an exercise which need training and practice, and could not be inserted into a program without consideration. In the opinion of Dyke et al. (66), “students might also benefit from a more gradual introduction to the concepts of reflection and self-assessment, and need to gain confidence in their ability to undertake these processes”. The participants in these studies considered reflections challenging and not always motivating. As for the reasons for perceiving reflections as not important, they were not specified by our study participants; however, literature demonstrates that some of the challenges associated with reflective writing at students’ level may include time constraints, perceptions of reflective practices as additional burden to students among key factors that impact student motivation and engagement (Lee; Chan, Lee).

## **Conclusion**

Reflective writing is the gate to sharpen general writing skill and encourage thoughtful and balanced level of thinking. Reflective writing assignments are very supportive for enabling students to develop new insights and perspectives in terms of written communication skills’ enhancement, development of the abilities to analyze and evaluate individual performance throughout the course, and make accurate conclusions. In addition, reflective writing helps students find out meaningful learning based on their daily experience and learning practice.

The results of the present study show that reflective writing assignments contribute to developing new insights and perspectives in terms of linguistic advancement in English, enhancement of written communication, and abilities to describe, analyze and evaluate individual performance and make accurate conclusions. Such practice might help in building learning experiences that boost students’ abilities to interact in writing, think critically and analytically, and map individual progress. For more effective practice of reflective writing and student supportive learning experience, language educators need to consider incorporating additional teaching materials and resources. This is especially relevant with the rise of digital technology through which reflections could add yet another layer to independent learning through writing.

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