

Research Article

Promoting EFL Learners' Writing Skills via Reflection: The Case of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

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Abstract

Writing skill is a challenging and frequently-used activity in academic circles. This study investigated the effects of reflective writing on EFL learners' writing performance. The participants were 61 Iranian EFL learners from two intact university classes randomly assigned to the non-reflective (n=31) and reflective (n=30) groups. Over sixteen sessions of instructions over eight weeks, the non-reflective group was taught using the traditional writing method; however, the reflective group was exposed to reflective writing instruction under Kolb's Model. The data were collected through reflective writing compositions and the content analysis of think-aloud protocols. The quantitative data analysis revealed that the reflective group significantly outperformed the non-reflective group in writing compositions. The thematic analysis of think-aloud protocols substantiated the quantitative data findings, indicating that all participants went through the cognitive psychological processes of 'planning, drafting, pausing and thinking, reading and reproducing, reviewing, editing and revising' as they were engaged in reflective writing via Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. The results offer significant implications for language instructors, curriculum planners, and course designers.

Keywords: Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, reflective writing, think-aloud protocol, traditional writing method, writing performance

Introduction

Improving language learning achievement has long been a significant problem in EFL contexts. Methodologists have used different language learning activities, such as cooperative and collaborative learning (Oxford, 1997; Swain, 1995), individualized language learning (Mitrovic & Ohlsson, 2006; Puzio, Colby, & Algeo-Nichols, 2020), and interactional learning activities (Sert, 2013; Tecedor, 2016; Walsh, 2014; Watanabe, 2016) to improve students' language skills. Writing skill, a fundamental component of academic communication, is widely recognized as a challenging yet essential activity within educational contexts (Atkinson, 2003). Effective writing skill enables students to convey their ideas, thoughts, and knowledge coherently and persuasively (Hinkel, 2015). As such, developing strong writing skill is a primary objective for both educators and learners. Writing is a challenging skill frequently used by students in academic circles (Arifin, 2021; Rashtchi, 2019) and deserves attention. However, Hamby (2011) believed that language teachers devote less time to this skill than other skills.

Methodologists have suggested different procedures such as product writing, process writing, journal writing, reflective journal writing, and reflective writing to improve learners' writing performance. Originators and followers of reflection and reflective learning (Dewey, 1933; Kolb, 2014; Moon, 2013a; Schon, 1984) believed that thinking about daily life experiences is unavoidable. Schon (1984) extended Dewey's viewpoints and asserted that the thinking process might occur during or after an experience, namely reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Following Dewey's ideas on reflection, Kolb (2014) contended that thinking over an experience should occur in a cyclical stage. Kolb formulated Dewey's ideas in a four-stage model: a) *concrete experience*, b) *reflective observation*, c) *abstract conceptualization*, and d) *active experimentation*. Thus, when a person confronts an experience, reflective observation is followed by conceptualization and experimentation. Kolb believed that by following these cyclical stages, learners transform their knowledge into learning. This mode of thinking seems to have been indirectly strengthened by Vygotsky's ideas on children's developmental growth and his explanations regarding inner speech as a stage in language acquisition and the thought process. Researchers have stated that reflective learning is practiced both individually (Arifin, 2021) and cooperatively (Erdogan, 2019) in different learning contexts (Griggs, Holden, Lawless, & Rae, 2018). Therefore, reflection as an essential tool for life-long learning (Salim, Susilawati, & Hanif, 2021) necessitates learners to think and review their learning experiences and learn from their and people's interpretations. It can lead individuals to take responsibility for their learning, enlighten their thinking habits, enhance critical thinking (Rashtchi &

Khoshnevisan, 2020), and create confidence in learners to engage in learning activities effectively to improve course performance (Cisero, 2006).

In the Iranian context, foreign language learners face several challenges in writing classes offered at higher education centers. While elementary levels focus on sound-symbol correspondences and correct spelling, advanced levels demand proficiency in diction, punctuation, unity, and coherence, adding complexity to the writing process. Consequently, systematic and continuous practice from the elementary to advanced levels is crucial in developing writing skills. Language teachers must allocate sufficient time to writing instruction and consider it a skill that requires dedicated practice, similar to other language competencies (Hamp-Lyons & Heasley, 2006).

The problem identified in the context of EFL learning is that traditional language teaching methods may not sufficiently address the complex nature of writing and the specific needs of learners. Such approaches often focus on grammatical structures and vocabulary, neglecting the importance of higher-order thinking skills and self-reflection in writing. However, reflective writing encourages learners to engage in self-reflection (Cheng & Chan, 2019; Yip, 2006), critical thinking (Yeh, Yang, & Shih, 2023), and a deeper understanding of their writing process (Farrah, 2012).

One way to cultivate reflective writing is to draw on the principles of Kolb's Experiential Language Learning (2014), which emphasizes a cyclical model of writing instruction. Following the four-stage model: *concrete experience* (directly engaging in writing), *reflective observation* (deeply thinking about one's written product), *abstract conceptualization* (learning from the writing experience), and *active experimentation* (testing what one has learned), learners can engage in a systematic and continuous writing process that encourages feedback from teachers and peers, leading to writing improvement. Following the model, a writing topic is introduced to the learners and practiced in four stages. Reflecting and writing on the same subject after receiving the teacher's feedback encourages learners to reflect on their errors and helps them improve their writing style. However, according to Kolb, the teacher does not score the students or explicitly correct their errors, which reduces learners' anxiety and helps them write in a stress-free environment. A critical characteristic of the model is to provide learners with enough time to think about their writing and enhance their writing quality. The model enables the instructor to understand whether learners can correct themselves based on the feedback they received while engaged in the next stage. Thus, the model's core concept is cultivating reflection on learning dynamically and cyclically. The model emphasizes the importance of practicing the assigned topic in different stages and encourages learners to

enhance their understanding, analysis, and application of knowledge. Within Kolb's framework, learning is the product of thinking and feeling, which learners cannot perform simultaneously.

Writing is crucial for students' academic and professional success, both in educational settings and the workplace (Arifin, 2021). Each year, a considerable number of graduate and undergraduate researchers publish numerous articles in various journals, highlighting the significance of effective writing skill. However, developing proficient writing abilities remains challenging for language teachers and learners alike, with writing often considered the most demanding skill to enhance (Kouhpeyma & Kashefian-Naeeni, 2020). As a kind of writing, reflective writing encourages individuals to analyze their experiences, thoughts, and emotions critically. It involves a process of self-reflection and introspection, enabling learners to gain deeper insights into their own learning and personal development (Moon, 2013a). Reflective writing is a valuable tool for enhancing various aspects of language learning, including writing (Van Manen, 2016).

As an integral component of reflective writing, reflection per se is a cognitive process that involves thinking critically about experiences, identifying patterns, and making connections to enhance learning outcomes (Cameron, 2009). It encourages learners to analyze their own thinking, assumptions, and actions, leading to deeper understanding and the development of metacognitive skills (Mezirow, 1991; Vachon & LeBlanc, 2011). Reflective practices have been shown to promote active engagement, self-regulation, and transformative learning experiences (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 2013; Kember et al., 2000).

Obtaining a level at which a writer can write clearly and comfortably is difficult for language learners. There are many reasons for this complexity, such as the complex nature of writing, the lack of student motivation (Sholah, 2019), learners' fear and pressure to write (Tuan, 2010), and the lack of sufficient time devoted to writing activities. Moreover, the curriculum in the Iranian educational system leaves writing skill unprivileged (Atai & Mazlum, 2013), and even private institutes put less emphasis on writing than on other skills. Moreover, most teachers feel overburdened by curriculum policy; therefore, there is no extra time or desire to adopt a new curricular practice or writing activity (Ohle, 2013). Furthermore, even if some teachers engage learners in writing activities, the results seem unsatisfactory due to using inappropriate writing procedures in their writing instruction. Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, and Wolfersberger (2010) argued that the weaknesses in instructional methodologies were the primary cause of learners' lack of improvement in writing performance. In Kolb's Model, these problems are

addressed due to ample time devoted to writing activity, lack of a scoring system or deadline to complete the task, and implicit correction as students discuss the writing topic in four connected cyclical stages. As a result, language learners feel less fear to (Arindra & Ardi, 2020) be engaged in the writing task to improve their writing performance.

Reflective writing instruction within Kolb's Model can help learners overcome the above problems. Moreover, it gives learners enough time to engage in writing activities during a four-stage session in addition to the assigned topic, which they should attempt at home. Arifin (2021) believed that the best solution to improve writing performance is to regularly engage learners in reflective writing as they are involved in extensive reflective reading. Researchers (e.g., Gibbs, 1988; Mezirow, 1991; Schon, 1984) have proposed different theoretical frameworks for 'reflection' in the literature.

Most researchers have addressed writing activity and its benefits in educational centers (e.g., Apsari, 2018; Portman, 2020). Some researchers have stated the effectiveness of reflection on writing performance; for example, Sholah (2019) found that journal writing facilitated the development of learners' writing abilities and enhanced their writing motivation. However, Kouhpeyma and Kashefian-Naeeni (2020), who investigated the impact of reflective writing on learners' writing performance, found no significant differences between the control and treatment groups regarding writing ability. In another study on reflective journal writing, Arifin (2021) showed that less skilled EFL graduate students had problems in writing compared to skillful graduate students. Still, other studies indicated that reflective writing is an appropriate strategy to improve learners' writing performance (Arifin, 2021; Sabooni & Salehi, 2015; Tuan, 2010).

Studies so far have investigated writing activity as learners engage in reflective writing outside of the classroom; however, due to the complexity of writing tasks, it seems logical to devote more time to practice writing both in and outside the class. One such opportunity is provided in Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, in which teachers support learners to practice reflective writing in class and can complete the task at home. The model allows learners to compare their practices in each stage with previous ones and implicitly lets them receive feedback from peers and the teacher.

Within the Iranian context, students face difficulty producing accurate written materials, prompting a need for investigation within the framework of reflective teaching (Hemmati & Soltanpour, 2012). Over the past two decades, several studies have explored the effects of reflective writing on writing performance in the Iranian context, demonstrating its potential to improve various aspects of writing (Bagheri & Pourgharib, 2013; Hemmati

& Soltanpour, 2012; Khodadady & Khodabakhshzade, 2012). Notably, Sabooni and Salehi (2015) reported significant improvements in learners' writing performance by implementing reflective portfolios.

Research findings indicate that reflective writing effectively improves learners' writing performance (Arifin, 2021; Sabooni & Salehi, 2015; Sholah, 2019; Tuan, 2010). It enhances motivation, develops writing skills, and promotes interactive communication between teachers and learners. However, not all studies show significant differences in writing ability when implementing reflective writing (Kouhpeyma & Kashefian-Naeeni, 2020) since it requires higher-order thinking skills (Alhosani, 2008), which seems challenging to most learners. Factors such as lack of motivation, fear, pressure, and insufficient time also contribute to the task's complexity.

Generally, the development of writing skill is often neglected in the Iranian educational system (Atai & Mazlum, 2013), and teachers face challenges in adopting new writing practices due to curriculum policies and inadequate instructional methodologies (Hartshorn, McCollum, & Wolfersberger, 2010; Ohle, 2013). The current study researchers assumed that incorporating Kolb's Model in writing activities might enhance EFL students' writing skill. Thus, they adopted a convergent mixed methods approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), developed a two-stage study, and collected quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously (implementing Kolb's Model for quantitative data gathering and using think-aloud protocols for qualitative data collection) to answer the following research questions.

RQ1: To what extent does reflective writing under Kolb's Model impact Iranian EFL learners' writing performance?

RQ2: To what extent do the results of the qualitative phase substantiate the quantitative findings?

Method

The present study employed a sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) to examine the effects of reflective writing within Kolb's Experiential Language Learning Cycle on EFL learners' writing performance. The study utilized quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate the impacts of reflective writing.

Participants

The participants were 61 B.A.-level students studying TEFL at the University of Kurdistan, Sanandaj, Iran. They were at the intermediate level (B1, according to the Common European Framework of Reference) based on the reading and writing sections of a Preliminary English Test (PET, available at <https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams-and-tests/preliminary/exam-format/>). The teacher (one of the researchers) administered the test to the participants at the onset of the semester to ensure whether the students' proficiency level allowed the implementation of a study on writing skill. The learners' scores in the reading section (32 questions) were between 24 and 28, and their writings (two questions), rated by two raters, had a mean of 13 and a standard deviation of 1.5. The students' writing scores were between 11.5 and 14.5). The students, aged 21 to 26 years old, were in two intact classes. One class, comprising 31(15 males and 16 females) students, was randomly selected as the non-reflective group, and the other class, including 30 students (13 males and 17 females), was assigned to the reflective group. Practical considerations primarily drove the utilization of intact classes in this study. Due to limited resources and the constraints of the educational setting, the availability of intact classes was more feasible than randomizing individual students into different groups.

Ethical guidelines were followed throughout the study to ensure the participants' rights and well-being. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Kurdistan reviewed and approved the research proposal and procedures. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, clearly explaining the nature of the study, their voluntary participation, and the confidentiality of their personal information. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The use of data collected from the participants was strictly limited to the purpose of the study and maintained in a secure and confidential manner.

Prior to their inclusion, the researchers provided detailed information about the study's objectives, procedures, and potential benefits. Participants were assured that their involvement in the study would not affect their academic standing or grades. They were also given the opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification before making an informed decision to participate.

Materials and Instruments

The researchers used the following instruments to collect data for the present study. The participants were selected from the B.A. TEFL program, 5th semester.

Timed Writing Composition

Two 50-minute writing tasks were used as the pretest (*How did you spend your weekend? Use specific reasons and examples to support your discussion*) and post-test (*What are the characteristics of your favorite instructor? Use specific reasons and examples to support your argument*).

Rubric for Scoring Timed Writing Composition

The researchers used an evaluation scale (Brown & Lee, 2015) to score the participants' composition. The rubric consists of a 100-point scheme using an analytic scoring procedure and emphasizing the "content-based nature of evaluation" (p. 456). In this rubric, 24% of the score is assigned to content, 20% to organization, 20% to discourse, 12% to syntax, 12% to vocabulary, and 12% to mechanics (Appendix). The Spearman-Brown prophecy formula was used to compute the inter-rater reliability ($r=.79$), indicating an acceptable index between the two raters who were university instructors with more than ten years of teaching writing. The scores were converted to 0-20 following the Iranian education system. This evaluation scale adopts an analytic scoring procedure, enabling raters to evaluate written products according to their content. The rubric assigns different weightings to various aspects of writing, including content, organization, discourse, syntax, vocabulary, and mechanics, and results in a comprehensive assessment of participants' writing skill. This multidimensional approach allows for a more nuanced evaluation of the participants' overall writing proficiency and provides insights into specific areas for improvement.

Think-Aloud Protocol

The think-aloud protocol was employed to capture the students' thought processes while participating in reflective writing activities. Think-alouds require learners to explain what they think and do while doing a learning activity, called metalinguistic verbalization, which facilitates learning (Fletcher, 1986). Since the present study dealt with participants' reflective processes, think-aloud helped the researchers to have a picture of the participants' thought processes while involved in writing. The think-aloud protocols were recorded for data analysis.

Procedure

The two groups participated in sixteen sessions of instruction during eight weeks. In each session, students were encouraged to participate in class discussions regarding writing activities before engaging in writing compositions. The reflective group was taught under Kolb's Experiential

Learning Cycle, and the non-reflective group received traditional ways of teaching, the details of which have been given under reflective and non-reflective instructions. In each session, both groups wrote compositions in class to improve their writing skill; however, they were allowed to complete them at home if the assigned time was insufficient. The data took two months for the researchers to collect. One of the researchers, who was also an English instructor, taught *American English File 2* (Clive, Christina, & Paul, 2013) to both groups. However, the reflective group experienced reflective writing instruction, while the non-reflective group received traditional writing instruction.

Reflective Writing Instruction

The teacher introduced Kolb's model to the class after a warm-up activity. Then, he assigned them a writing task. To familiarize students with think-aloud practices, the teacher explained how to employ a think-aloud procedure while doing a task. Thus, as a preparatory activity, participants were asked to verbalize their thought processes while engaged in a writing activity. Yoshida (2008) stated that think-aloud protocols are used in areas such as reading, writing, and testing as verbal reports to study the cognitive process involved in language acquisition. The reflective group practiced the think-aloud activity in one session before initiating the actual instruction. The reflective group received instruction in reflective writing within the framework of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, as explained below:

First, the instructor, one of the researchers, asked the students to form six groups. Each group consisted of five students. It is worth mentioning that groups did not change before the completion of practicing the four cycles. In the first stage, *Kolb's Concrete Experience*, the learners encountered a writing experience. In other words, they got involved in actual writing. The objective was to encourage participants to initiate their writing with openness and willingness. To achieve this, the teacher presented the topic "*Describe your favorite apartment*" and used motivational statements to encourage students to brainstorm. They were instructed to incorporate the structures they had previously learned in their writing exercises, allowing words, phrases, and sentences to flow naturally from their thoughts. In each group, a volunteer was asked to verbalize while engaged in the writing activity, and their verbalization was recorded.

Moving on to the second stage, *Kolb's Reflective Observation*, the focus shifted to observing the experience and generating more related sentences. Students were prompted to reflect on their writings, review the written structures, and concentrate on expanding their ideas. They were expected to examine whether their writings reflected their intended message. For

example, if the topic was “*My favorite photo*,” they were encouraged to reflect on how pictures, buildings, or faces had been described in previous learning contexts. Then, students were asked to think aloud as they expressed themselves using different structures.

In the third stage, *Kolb's Abstract Conceptualization*, learners were engaged in conceptualizing and generating new structures for the concepts or structures used in the previous stages. The learners were expected to modify their compositions and try to add new ideas to what they had produced in the previous stage. If a participant used a particular structure to describe an aspect of the given topic, other students were expected to convey the same idea using different forms. For instance, if students had encountered sentences such as “*The truck was as heavy as a rock*” or “*The racing car sped up like an airplane on the road*” in their learning materials, they would create sentences like: “*My favorite sportsmen were as powerful as a truck*” or “*My favorite sportsmen ran as fast as the racing car speeding up at the finish line.*” It is important to note that throughout each stage, both teacher and peer feedback played a crucial role in assisting students in their self-correction process. Notably, when one student was ready to do a task, they verbalized their thought processes, and the teacher recorded them.

Finally, in the fourth stage, *Kolb's Active Experimentation*, students applied what they had learned in previous cycles to a new situation. The instructor reminded them to utilize the acquired structures and concepts to write a composition on a new topic within a 50-minute timeframe. Then, they were expected to explain what was new in their writing and what was conveyed from their previous writing experience. The teacher asked volunteers to speak out while they were writing. As usual, when they stopped, the instructor would remind them to verbalize what they were thinking, and at the same time, their verbalizations were recorded. During this stage, students could consult with their peers while expressing themselves. They could also complete their compositions at home and submit them in the subsequent session. Several students read their manuscripts aloud in the next session. Reading aloud allowed the student writer to review their writing once more. Besides, it allowed the classmates to listen carefully, familiarize themselves with others' viewpoints, and compare the composition with their writing. One way to facilitate reflection is by comparing and understanding the differences between things (Rashtchi & Khoshnevisan, 2020). The instructor provided the correct form when encountering a problematic area orally, first implicitly in the form of reformulations and recasts or explicitly by providing the correct structure. Using different forms of error correction depended on the student's recognition of the error. If a student could understand the erroneous point via implicit

feedback, the teacher provided subjective words such as bravo, good, and excellent. If the student did not realize the error, he provided the correct form explicitly. The subjective words or type of feedback were used for encouragement, not affecting the final evaluation.

Non-Reflective Writing Instruction

The teacher followed non-reflective practices for teaching writing in class. After a warm-up, the students formed different groups to discuss an assigned topic. The topic selected for the writing activity was like the one discussed in the reflective group. Therefore, the teacher raised some common issues for the students to think about before writing. He asked the students to brainstorm and make as many sentences as possible. While the students spoke out their sentences, the instructor corrected their errors and highlighted the importance of using appropriate words, diction, collocation, punctuation, coherence, and unity. The teacher taught the students writing components (e.g., topic sentences, supporting sentences, concluding paragraphs, etc.) and explained how to write coherently by organizing the sentences they had produced in the brainstorming phase. Then, he asked them to write a composition (the topics were the same as the reflective group) in 50 minutes. They discussed the issue together before writing and could complete their essays at home. In the following session, several students read their compositions, and the teacher clarified the problems related to collocation, grammaticality, punctuation, coherence, and unity. In the final stage, the teacher gave participants a well-written version of the topic, read it to the class, and asked them to underline the cohesive markers and explained how a good composition should have cohesion.

Data Analysis

SPSS 20 was used to analyze the data. The data gathered during the treatment were statistically analyzed using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA). Before running ANCOVA, all assumptions were checked to verify the legitimacy of using the statistical procedure. Content analysis was performed to analyze participants' think-aloud protocols.

Results

Quantitative Data Analysis

ANCOVA was used to answer the first research question. According to Pallant (2013), the assumptions of linearity, homogeneity of variances, and homogeneity of regression slopes must be examined before performing ANCOVA. The results of the assumption of the linear relationship between

the dependent variable (post-test of writing ability) and the covariates (pretest of writing ability) are shown in Figure 1.

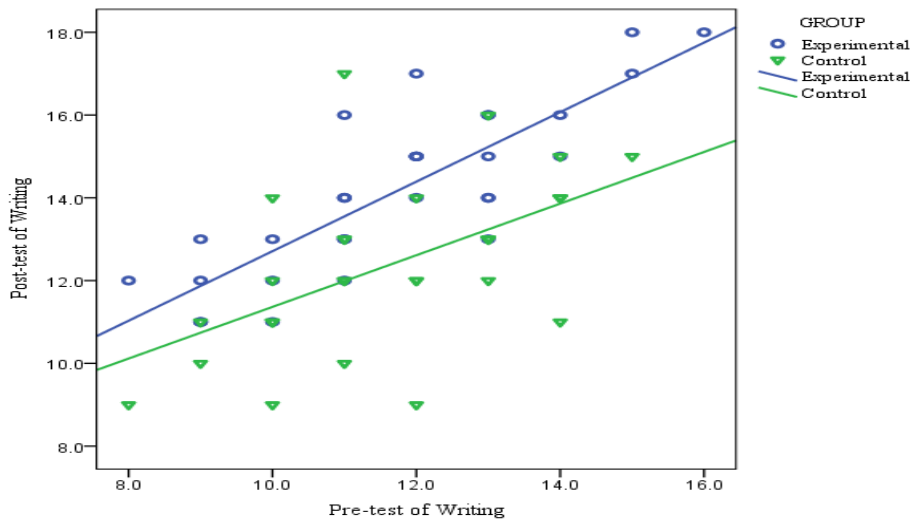


Figure 1: Scatter Plot for Writing Scores in the Groups (Pretest & Post-test)

As shown in Figure 1, the scatter plot illustrates two straight lines between the two study groups' pretest (covariate) and post-test scores, indicating that the linearity assumption was not violated. Homogeneity of variances is another assumption that should be examined before running ANCOVA. Therefore, the results of Levene's test have been presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances for Writing Ability Scores by Group

Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
.498	1	59	.48

Table 1 shows that the assumption of variances' homogeneity was not violated for writing ability scores ($F=.49$, $p=.48$). The third assumption relates to the homogeneity of regression slopes (Table 2).

Table 2

Regression Slopes for the Effect of Reflective Language Learning on Writing Ability

Source	Type III	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
	Sum of Squares					

Corrected Model	154.11	3	51.37	26.37	.00	.58
Group * Pretest	1.80	1	1.80	.92	.34	.02
Error	109.07	57	1.95			
Total	11388.00	61				

As Table 2 shows, there was no statistically significant difference between the writing ability of the groups before and after the treatment ($F_{(1, 57)} = .92$, $p = .34$). Thus, the pretest and post-test writing ability scores in the two groups enjoyed the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes.

One-way ANCOVA was run to compare the effectiveness of reflective language learning (independent variable) on EFL learners' writing ability (dependent variable). Participants' scores on the writing pretest were the covariate. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics from the writing pretest and post-test scores.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of Writing Scores on Pretest and Post-test (Average of the Two Raters)

Test	Group	N	Mean	SD	SEM
Pretest	Reflective	30	11.93	1.99	.36
	Non-reflective	31	12.06	1.70	.31
Post-test	Reflective	30	14.45	1.96	.38
	Non-reflective	31	12.77	1.88	.35

As shown in Table 3, the mean scores of writing ability in the reflective group ($M = 11.93$, $SD = 1.99$) and non-reflective group ($M = 12.06$, $SD = 1.70$) are close to each other on the pretest; however, the mean score of writing ability in the reflective group ($M = 14.45$, $SD = 1.96$) is much higher than the one in the non-reflective ($M = 12.77$, $SD = 1.88$) on the post-test. Two raters marked the writing essays, and the average of their scores comprised each student's total score. A bar graph (Figure 2) depicts the results of both pretest and post-test for the groups regarding writing ability.

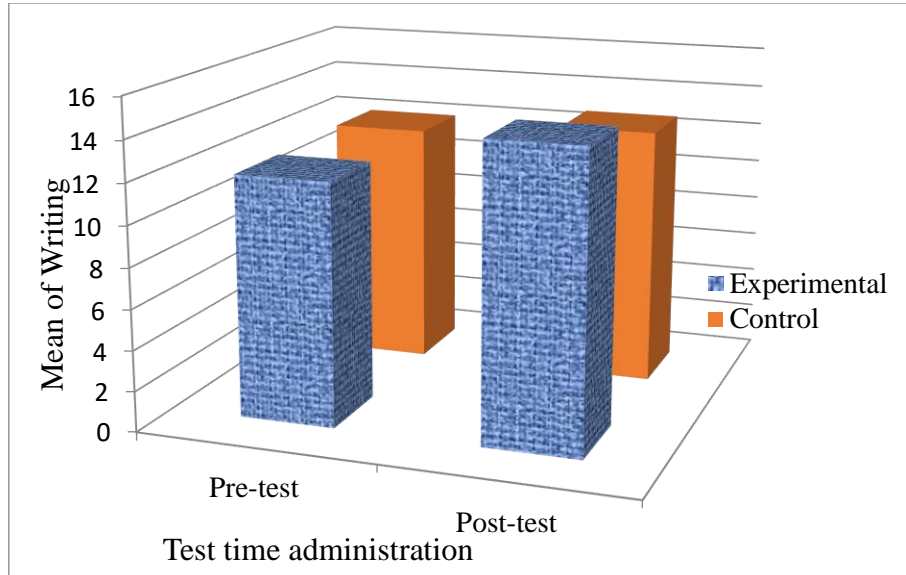


Figure 2: Bar Graph for Groups' Writing Means (Pretest & Post-test)

As observable from the bar graph, the mean scores of writing ability in the experimental and control groups are almost at the same level on the pretest, while on the post-test, the mean score for the experimental group is considerably higher than the control one. Table 4 summarizes the results of ANCOVA.

Table 4

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects of Reflective Language Learning on Writing

Source	Type III Squares	Sum of <i>df</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	Sig.	Partial Squared	Eta
Corrected Model	152.30	2	76.15	39.14	.00	.58	
Intercept	30.84	1	30.84	15.85	.00	.22	
Pretest	110.64	1	110.64	56.87	.00	.50	
Group	46.68	1	46.68	23.99	.00	.29	
Error	110.87	58	1.94				
Total	11388.00	61					
Corrected Total	263.18	60					

As Table 4 indicates, after adjusting for the writing ability scores on the pretest, there was a significant difference between the two groups' writing ability scores on the post-test, $F_{(1, 58)} = 23.99$, $p < .001$, partial eta squared = .29; as a result, it can be claimed that reflective language learning improved the writing ability of the participants. Moreover, as evident from Table 4, there was a strong relationship between the pre-intervention and post-intervention scores on the total writing ability, as shown by the p -value ($p < .001$, $F_{(1, 58)} = 56.87$). In other

words, the writing ability scores gained on the pretest affected the writing ability scores achieved on the post-test. The partial eta squared (effect size) value is .50, which indicates a large effect size.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The researchers needed to gather data from the participants' think-aloud protocols to better probe into the quantitative data findings and learn about the effectiveness of using the think-aloud protocol to understand the writing process. To this end, the reflective groups' writing activities during Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle were recorded and later transcribed for data analysis.

As mentioned earlier, Kolb's Model consists of four interrelated cycles. In *stage one*, the purpose is to help learners use the learning experience to start speaking with openness and willingness. Thus, the teacher (one of the researchers) used encouraging statements to motivate the students to participate in the learning activities and write down as many sentences as possible on '*Describe your favorite apartment.*' The teacher asked the participants to verbalize their thoughts and jot down as many ideas as possible. All learners willingly participated in the activity without fear of committing errors, probably because they knew the teacher did not score their performances.

Think-aloud protocol is a research methodology that demands one or more participants to verbalize their thoughts as they perform a task or activity (Ericsson & Simon, 1993; Van Someren, Barnard, & Sandberg, 1994). After recording the participants' verbalizations and transcribing them, content analysis was used. Content analysis is "a research method for subjective interpretation of the content of the text data through the systematic classification of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). More than one hundred protocols were extracted from the participants' verbalizations while doing tasks or activities. After removing the repeated protocols and those referring to the same thought process, the number of protocols was reduced. The following "themes" emerged from think-aloud protocols analysis since most participants went through the cognitive process of "planning, drafting, pausing and thinking, reading and reproducing, reviewing, editing and revising," which ended in the 'improvement' of their writing performance as it was understood from comparing and contrasting the participants writing performances under Kolb's Model. Samples of the common structures or phrases expressed by participants in the following four cyclical stages help clarify the better understanding of the gradual improvement. A sample of the protocol expressed by a participant in *stage one, Kolb's Concrete Experience*, was:

“My apartment to be large. ... You know having a view, pool. (hesitation) Good weather. Everybody likes it. Having three rooms I want to have. I like (hesitation)... it should have two yards, one in front and one in back. ... (pausing and going back to read the sentences) ...What... what else? Having space for parking car..., rooms for pet animal and sport facilities are also nice.”

In *stage two*, Kolb's *Reflective Observation*, the purpose is to help the participants observe the experience and state as many sentences as possible. Thus, the teacher asked students to reflect on the learning experience, review their notes, and generate more sentences. A sample of protocols by *one participant* in *stage two* was as follows:

“I like to have an apartment. I mean, it is better to be large. ... So, everybody likes it. You know, to have a good pool is interesting, and a good view is also important. (hesitation)..... I like my apartment have three rooms. It should have two yards, one yard in front and one yard at back. (hesitation)..... I need to have some other rooms for pet animals and sport facilities. Of course, it should also have large spaces for parking some cars.”

The two sample protocols indicate that participants' writings improved compared to *stage one*. In *stage one*, the ideas were generally expressed in words and phrases. However, in *stage two*, the same ideas were expressed in short, simple sentences despite having a few problems producing grammatical sentences. Moreover, all participants seemed more relaxed and confident compared to the *first stage*.

In *stage three*, Kolb's *Abstract Conceptualization*, the purpose is to help participants use new concepts and structures for the ideas used in previous stages. Thus, the instructor asked the students to reflect on their previous writings and convey the same ideas using new concepts or structures. The protocols mentioned by *a participant* in *stage three* were:

“It is very enjoyable to live in an apartment to have different types of facilities. For this reason, I like to have a large apartment with three rooms.... (hesitation).... I select one room for myself and one for my pet animal. I choose another room for my sport facilities. My apartment should have a good view. The view will be to the mountains, hills, or parks. In addition to this, I like my apartment to have a swimming pool. (pause).... I choose a space for the cars. Of course, the parking place should have a roof to protect the cars in front of sun, rain, and snow. Therefore, it is enjoyable to have such a valuable apartment.”

The extract shows that students' writing improved compared to *stage two*, in which they used simple sentences to express different ideas. They used compound sentences with qualifiers and modifiers in *stage three* to convey the same ideas. For instance, "*I would like to have a large apartment with three rooms*" is the modified and improved form of "*I like to have a large apartment*" and "*I like my apartment have three rooms.*" In addition, it seemed to the researchers that they could write sentences to develop the topic sentence. For example, the main features of a good apartment, "*having different types of facilities,*" is further explained as "*having three rooms, two yards, parking lots, and overlooking the hills, mountains, or parks.*" Yet, the writings contained minor errors, which were eliminated in *stage four* after the participants received feedback on their compositions.

In *stage four*, Kolb's *Active Experimentation*, the purpose is to make participants generalize what they have practiced in the previous *stages* to the new situations. Thus, the participants were asked to form groups, discuss the new topic (*The characteristic of your favorite friend*), and write a composition in 50 minutes. The following is a sample of a composition by a *participant*:

"My favorite friend, Himan, should have the following characteristics. He should be tall, kind, and good-looking. He should be about 165 to 180 centimeters. He should be neither fat nor thin. His skin should be neither black nor white. He should be kind and very helpful. Such a kind person can help me whenever I ask for his help. Moreover, he should be sociable and has a good relationship with other people. Therefore, such a person is a good friend to have relationship."

In *stage four*, the participants could easily generalize what they had learned to the new situations. They seemed more relaxed, confident, and self-regulated to discuss the topics. The sign of natural speech was observed in their performances. However, their writings were devoid of variety, and they used the repeated phrases in their essays (e.g., the use of *He should ...* in the above extract). It is worth mentioning that in comparison to *stage three*, coherence, unity, and conclusion were observed in the compositions. Thus, the writing tasks taught under Kolb's Model and content analysis of think-aloud protocols, in line with the quantitative data, showed that the reflective writing done in four- cyclical stages improved participants' writing performance.

In conclusion, the themes that emerged from the qualitative data analysis include "planning, drafting, pausing and thinking, reading and reproducing, reviewing, editing and revising," which ended in *improving* students' writing skill and the *benefits* of avoiding explicit evaluation. In the first stage, students wrote down ideas and phrases without fear of being evaluated, which

allowed them *to express themselves more freely*. In the second stage, they reflected on their previous notes and produced *more structured sentences*, albeit with some grammatical errors. In the third stage, they used new concepts and structures *to convey their ideas more effectively*. Finally, in the fourth stage, *they applied* what they had learned to a new topic and wrote a composition in a group. The data suggest that Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle can promote students' writing skill through reflective writing activities.

Discussion

The present study investigated the impact of reflective writing on EFL writing performance. Thus, to answer the first research question, as shown in Table 4, after adjusting for the writing ability scores on the pretest, there was a significant difference between the two groups' writing ability scores on the post-test, leading to the conclusion that reflective language learning improves the writing ability of Iranian EFL learners. The findings support the theoretical basis of reflection (Arnold, Warner, & Osborne, 2006; Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 2013; Boyd & Fales, 1983; Gibbs, 1988; Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2014; Moon, 1999; Moon, 2013b; Schön, 1987), suggesting that reflection over any ordinary or learning experiences end in learning and building new concepts based on the past experiences. The findings also align with several studies (Arifin, 2021; Farrah, 2012; Meza, Rodríguez, & Caviedes, 2021; Portman, 2020; Sabooni & Salehi, 2015; Salim, Susilawati, & Hanif, 2021; Sudirman, Gemilang, & Kristanto, 2021; Tuan, 2010), indicating that reflective writing improves learners' writing performance. However, the findings are against those who found that reflective learning does not impact students' writing performance (Kouhpeyma & Kashefian-Naeeni, 2020).

The current study assumes that adopting appropriate reflective activities under a teacher's guidance and peers' collaboration can improve learners' writing performance. Kolb's Experimental Learning Cycle allows learners to reflect, observe, conceptualize, review, revise, and generalize the writing experience to future performance. Within Kolb's framework, students have enough time to focus on writing activities, think over learning experiences, and receive help from the teacher and peers. Likewise, the qualitative data collected through think-aloud protocols showed a gradual improvement in learners' writing performance, thus substantiating the quantitative results. The usefulness of collaboration and mentoring in writing practices have also been emphasized in the literature (Hemmati & Soltanpour, 2012; Zubizarreta, 2009).

Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle enjoys unique characteristics resulting in enhancing writing ability. In this model, writing is regularly practiced at an increasing pace, helping learners promote their writing ability (Sholah, 2019). Besides, since there is no deadline for a writing task, learners feel no fear of

scoring or pressure to complete a task (Tuan, 2010). As Farrah (2012) stated, the model motivates learners to write and learn since they do not need to worry about grades. Further, learners repeatedly review their previous learning to recheck their understanding, and since the stages of learning are interrelated, improvement occurs systematically. Moreover, the teacher's implicit and explicit feedback in each stage contributes to learners' writing improvement (Ahmed, 2019; Arikan, 2006). On the whole, the model fosters learners' confidence (Kouhpeyma & Kashefian-Naeeni, 2020) to express themselves in their writing practices.

The qualitative data analysis further supports the quantitative analysis, indicating that reflective writing activities positively affect learners' writing performance. The qualitative data collected through think-aloud protocols showed that students went through a psychological process of "planning, drafting, pausing and thinking, reading and reproducing, reviewing, editing and revising," which ended in gradual improvement in learners' writing skill as they progressed through the stages of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. This finding corroborates the quantitative results and underscores the effectiveness of adopting appropriate reflective activities under the guidance of a teacher and through peer collaboration. The unique characteristics of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle contribute to enhancing learners' writing ability. The model provides learners with regular writing practice, allowing them to develop their writing progressively.

Moreover, the absence of strict deadlines for submission of the compositions and grading-related pressure creates a supportive environment that motivates learners to engage in writing with less fear. The iterative nature of the learning stages in the model facilitates systematic improvement as learners continuously revisit and refine their understanding of the writing task. Additionally, the teacher's implicit and explicit feedback at each stage contributes to learners' writing improvement.

Furthermore, the cyclical process inherent in Kolb's model, characterized by repeated evaluation and revision of compositions, fosters a deepened understanding and synthesis of ideas. Learners have the opportunity to revise their compositions without time constraints, allowing for the refinement of their written expression. This iterative process also nurtures learners' confidence to express themselves freely in their writing practices. The findings of this study align with the literature that emphasizes the benefits of collaboration and mentoring in writing practices (Hemmati & Soltanpour, 2012; Zubizarreta, 2009). By engaging in reflective writing activities within a supportive learning environment, learners can receive valuable input from their peers and the teacher, enhancing their writing performance.

In summary, the quantitative and qualitative results support the notion that reflective writing, implemented through Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, promotes the development of learners' writing skill. The findings highlight the importance of adopting appropriate reflective activities, collaboration, and mentoring in writing instruction to facilitate meaningful learning experiences and improve writing performance.

The current study attempted to shed more light on the effectiveness of using Kolb's model for teaching writing in the Iranian context. Quantitative data analysis revealed that the reflective group outperformed the non-reflective group significantly. The results of pretest and post-test compositions, content analysis of the think-aloud protocols, and comparing and contrasting learners' improvement in Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle showed that the model helped promote the students' writing skill.

The findings of this study have important implications for L2 teachers, learners, course designers, material developers, and curriculum planners, particularly in the context of writing instruction. The significant improvement observed in the reflective group compared to the non-reflective group highlights the effectiveness of incorporating reflective writing instruction in language classrooms.

L2 teachers are encouraged to integrate reflective language learning activities, specifically in the context of writing skill, into their instructional practices. Through reflective writing, learners can receive substantial in-class feedback from the teacher and their peers while reading aloud their written products in the class. This interactive feedback process facilitates accelerated learning, enabling learners to make noticeable progress in a shorter period. Therefore, teachers should consider incorporating reflective writing tasks and promoting meaningful interactions among students to enhance the writing performance of their learners.

Furthermore, the inclusion of exercises on reflective writing in textbooks can greatly benefit learners. By incorporating reflective tasks, textbooks provide opportunities for students to engage in deep thinking and reflection on the learning materials. This approach encourages learners to go beyond a surface-level understanding and actively analyze and internalize the content. Consequently, textbooks should be designed to promote reflective practices, allowing students to critically examine and ponder the materials rather than simply skimming through them. Curriculum planners play a crucial role in educational planning, and it is imperative for them to acknowledge the significance of reflection and reflective learning. By incorporating reflective language learning as an integral part of the curriculum, planners can create a learning environment that fosters metacognitive awareness and encourages

learners to engage in reflective practices across various language skills. Reflective learning should be recognized as a valuable component of the curriculum, promoting deep learning and enhancing learners' overall language proficiency.

Although this study has provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of reflective writing instruction in promoting writing skill among B.A. students majoring in English at the University of Kurdistan, Sanandaj, Iran, there are further avenues for exploration and expansion of the research. Replication of this study at the high school level and in other regions of the country would contribute to a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of reflective writing across different educational contexts. By conducting similar investigations with diverse student populations, the generalizability of the findings can be expanded, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of reflective writing instruction.

Additionally, future research can explore implementing alternative data-gathering procedures to enrich the existing knowledge base. Incorporating methods such as observation and semi-structured interviews would provide valuable qualitative insights into learners' experiences with reflective writing. These approaches can offer a more nuanced understanding of the effects of reflective practices on learners' writing development and their perceptions of the process. Moreover, utilizing innovative channels and platforms, such as Google Expeditions and Blogs, can allow learners to engage in reflective writing outside traditional classroom environments. Exploring these alternative avenues for data collection can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the potential of reflective writing instruction and its practical implementation in various learning settings. Furthermore, future studies could investigate the long-term effects of reflective writing instruction by examining learners' writing performance and language development over an extended period. Longitudinal studies can shed light on the sustainability of the benefits derived from reflective practices and help determine the lasting impact on learners' writing skill.

Conflict of interest: None

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