

An Exploratory Study of Reflective Dialogue Journal Writing of EFL Graduate Students in the English as a Foreign Language Context

REONGRUDEE MANEERPAKHATHORN

Chulalongkorn University Language Institute, Bangkok, Thailand

Author email: reongrudee@yahoo.com

Article information	Abstract
<p>Article history: Received: 6 Jun 2022 Accepted: 7 Mar 2023 Available online: 27 Mar 2023</p> <p>Keywords: EFL writing Writing fluency Dialogue journal writing Reflective dialogue journal writing</p>	<p><i>This study was conducted to examine Thai EFL graduate students' perceptions towards reflective dialogue journal writing (RDJW), their writing fluency as well as self-awareness of their own English language learning and writing development. Thirty-four Thai graduate students aged 23 to 39 were required to carry out the RDJW task for 13 weeks – one journal entry per week. The teacher provided feedback to each journal entry on its content to which the students replied in a dialogic manner. After having completed 13 journal entries, the students completed a questionnaire and were interviewed individually. In addition, focus group discussions were implemented. The students' writing fluency was also assessed quantitatively through a product-based indicator. The findings of the study revealed that the students viewed RDJW as a means to engage a student and the teacher in a two-way communication as they exchanged information without worrying about making or correcting errors in the writing. The students also reported an improvement in their writing fluency since their journal entries were longer and they could communicate their thoughts and feelings more easily. A paired t-test confirmed the significant gains in terms of the number of words written in the journals. RDJW also served as students' reflection which heightened the awareness of their own English language learning and writing development.</i></p>

INTRODUCTION

Journal writing has long been used by educators and teachers as a tool to involve students in literacy practice, especially reading and writing while promoting thinking and reflection. It has also emerged as one of the most well-known learning strategies that support the writing process (English & Gillen, 2001; Peyton, 1993, 2000; Reed, 1993). To further ensure that students' messages come across, a journal writing activity can be made interactive by engaging a student and a teacher in two-way communication in a dialogue as they exchange information without worrying about making or correcting errors in the writing.

Dialogue journals were first developed by a sixth-grade teacher, Leslie Reed, in Los Angeles in 1980 and they were used with native English-speaking students (Staton et al., 1988). Since then, they were adopted in many educational settings. Their use has spread in all levels of education – from primary to undergraduate classes – aiming at improving students’ practical reasoning and problem-solving abilities (Isserlis, 1991; Staton, 1980). They are also widely used in all levels of English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction (Abednia et al, 2013; Head, 2016; Johnson & Cheng, 2019; Khairunnisa, 2018; Kim, 2005; Myers, 2001; Patterson, 2013; Tuan, 2010).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Journal writing and dialogue journal writing

A great body of research confirmed the effectiveness of dialogue journal writing in helping ESL/EFL students enhance their writing ability. For instance, Tuan’s research (2010) showed that second-year students from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Vietnam using dialogue journal writing better improved their writing skills. Likewise, Foroutan et al. (2013) found that Malaysian undergraduate students’ writing abilities were significantly improved after they practiced writing through dialogue journal writing. In addition, Rattanaintanin (2017) conducted a study in Thailand to investigate the impact of using dialogue journals to enhance EFL university students’ writing abilities in terms of fluency and accuracy and found positive results. In another study by Johnson and Cheng (2019), they studied the effects of dialogue journal writing on enhancing the writing proficiency of Japanese learners of English. It was found that dialogue journal writing was proved to be more effective than error-corrected feedback in improving university students’ overall writing ability.

Although dialogue journals have been widely used to improve EFL undergraduate students’ writing ability, their use has not been explored with EFL graduate students, especially in Thai contexts, hence highlighting the need for further research in this area. For graduate studies, writing is even more essential and it is required since graduate students are expected to write academic articles/papers as well as research reports (Cone, 2016; Holmes et al., 2018; Merc, 2016). However, there are discrepancies between graduate students’ writing abilities and graduate schools’ expectations since graduate students still face difficulties trying to fulfill their writing assignments (Holmes et al., 2018). It is, therefore, significant to explore a way to help improve EFL graduate students’ writing skills.

Lagan (2000) emphasizes that one excellent way to practice writing is to keep a daily journal. Daily journal and freewriting (without grammar correction) may also give EFL students a chance to express themselves communicatively and ease their anxiety as well as their hesitation in producing a written piece (Head, 2016; Johnson & Cheng, 2019; Khairunnisa, 2018; Rattanaintanin, 2017). This paper, therefore, reports on whether keeping a journal can help Thai graduate students practice their writing skills and, therefore, increase their writing fluency.

Fluency in writing

According to Collins Dictionary (HarperCollins, n.d.), fluency can be referred to in both spoken and written outputs. Brown (1994) defines fluency in writing as “a steady flow of language for a short period of time without any self- or other correction at all” (p. 113). As a result, the length and the number of words produced can be a way to indicate a writer’s fluency.

To focus on fluency in writing is to encourage students to just write or produce written language without being worried about accuracy and that is a useful way to get them to start writing and focus on their writing goals (Gilliland, 2021). That is, non-graded writing aiming at meaning rather than accurate use of the language (e.g., dialogue journal writing) leads to fluency in writing. According to Semke (1984) and Head (2016), grammatical feedback from the teacher did not help increase student writing ability or accuracy. On the contrary, overreliance on accuracy can prevent EFL students from taking risks in writing (Head, 2016). The content-based feedback, on the other hand, gave a positive effect on the number of words in student writing pieces. In addition, Bonzo’s research (2008) has confirmed that writing fluency promotes grammatical complexity.

Some researchers have associated writing fluency with text production quantity (Chenoweth & Hayes, 2001; Lannin, 2007; Wolfe-Quintero et al., 1998). Others have assessed writing fluency in terms of quantity and quality by assessing writing quantity, accuracy, and complexity together (Armstrong, 2010; Dengub, 2012; Ellis & Yuan, 2004; Johnson et al., 2012).

In this study, writing fluency has been referred to in the aspect of text quantity because the aim of reflective dialogue journal writing is not for students to produce accurate pieces of work but to encourage them to write as many words as they can to communicate with their teacher on a given topic and the topic they have chosen. In addition, it is interesting to see whether journal writing can enhance students’ writing fluency without focusing on accuracy. Their writing fluency was then assessed through a product-based indicator by looking into the number of words written in their journals over time and by exploring how freely they can communicate their thoughts and feelings in writing.

Students’ reflection and reflective dialogue journal writing (RDJW)

A reflective journal has been proven to be a means to provide students with an opportunity to reflect on their learning experiences critically and analytically. It also encourages them to become involved in deep reflection on their own learning and realize their own strengths and weaknesses for further improvement. Moreover, the research found that the characteristic of reflective journals, which is dialogic in nature, improved university students’ lifelong learning and teachers’ professional practice (Abednia et al.; 2013; Ahmed, 2019; Rodgers, 2002; Rogers, 2001). As a result, exploring students’ reflections can heighten the awareness of their own learning and writing process (Abednia et al., 2013; Anderson, 2012; Pavlovich, 2007).

Reflective journals have been used for different purposes. For instance, Watson (2010) explored the use of reflective journals as a tool to develop an understanding of students’ learning and

found that the students' reflective journals revealed a gradual improvement in students' understanding of different expository methods. Ahmed (2019) explored the impact of students' reflective journals on informing instructional practices in an EFL writing context at a university in Qatar and found that reflective journals helped the teacher gain information on students' instructional preferences and challenges.

Based on the potential of reflective dialogue journal writing (RDJW) from the literature review and the lack of information on its implementation in Thai contexts, the current study aims at incorporating RDJW into a graduate English course to maximize language use and literacy development for Thai graduate students as well as to encourage them to reflect on their English learning experiences.

The research questions guiding the study are as follows:

1. What are the graduate students' perceptions towards RDJW?
2. To what extent RDJW helps develop graduate students' writing fluency?
3. What does RDJW tell the students about their English language learning and writing development?

METHOD

Participants

Thirty-four EFL graduate students enrolled in Academic English for Graduate Studies course at a public university in Bangkok were recruited to participate in the study by means of convenience sampling. All students were informed about the study before consenting to participate. It was made clear that their decision to participate or not to participate would not affect their grades and that only the journal entries of those who consented were analyzed. The participating students included 11 males and 23 females. Their ages ranged from 23 to 39 years. At the time of the study, 12 were studying in their first year; 15 in their second year; five in their third year, and two in their fourth year. The students participating in the study had the CU-TEP (Chulalongkorn University Test of English Proficiency) scores ranging from 42 to 59 out of 120. It can then be concluded from their scores that their English ability was at a low intermediate level.

Instruments

1. The journal entries

The students' journal entries had two main topics: first, their reflection on what they had learned each week; second, the topic of their own selection. Guidelines were provided for completing the first main topic. In addition, the students were encouraged to explore their thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to their English language learning and their writing skills/development. They were required to write 13 entries throughout the semester. These entries were then used to quantitatively and qualitatively examine their writing fluency and self-awareness of their own English language learning.

2. The questionnaire

In order to effectively answer the research questions, a self-reported questionnaire containing personal data, a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire, and open-ended questions, was implemented. The first part, personal data, provided information on the characteristics of the participants. The second part was divided into 3 subparts to report on (1) students' perceptions towards RDJW, (2) students' self-reflections on doing RDJW as well as on their writing fluency, and (3) self-awareness of their own English language learning. Lastly, the third part which comprised open-ended questions was designed specifically to be used during the focus group discussion and the semi-structured interview sessions.

The questionnaire was evaluated for its content validity (IOC: Index of Item Objective Congruence) by five experts in the field and was adjusted accordingly before being piloted and then evaluated by Cronbach's alpha (0.89) to determine its internal consistency.

3. The semi-structured interview

One-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain more insight into students' perceptions towards RDJW and the awareness of their own English language learning and their writing development.

Procedures

The Journal Entries: On the first day of the class, students were told that they would be participating in a continuing, private, written conversation with the teacher. Each student received the writing instruction which included the mechanics of what to write and when to submit the journals as well as when to receive the journals back each week. Topics for dialogue journal writing were given as guidelines so that the students could elaborate on the given topics and/or extend to other topics they felt comfortable sharing with the teacher. Therefore, to start their weekly RDJW, students were advised to take stock of what they learned in class in a week and look through their class notebooks for a quick reminder of the weekly topics and activities. Then, they could focus on what they, personally, took from the week's classroom activities and what they thought about the class in general and/or any activity, in particular. They were also advised to think of how the class content was useful to them and whether they actually made use of what they learned in any circumstances outside the classroom.

Within the semester, each student wrote 13 entries, i.e. about one per week, as part of the course assignments. The students were encouraged to write as much as they wanted to within one-time writing for each entry. That is, they were required not to stop writing before finishing each entry. As for the teacher, she responded to the students' journal entries weekly. Her role was a good conversationalist and an engaged listener who would interact with the topics and concerns as well as ask questions and offer encouragement and advices. Therefore, the teacher responded to each entry in English by giving feedback on the students' reflections, raising relevant issues and questions, asking for clarification, and giving her opinions, for example. It was made clear that the teacher would not correct the students' writing.

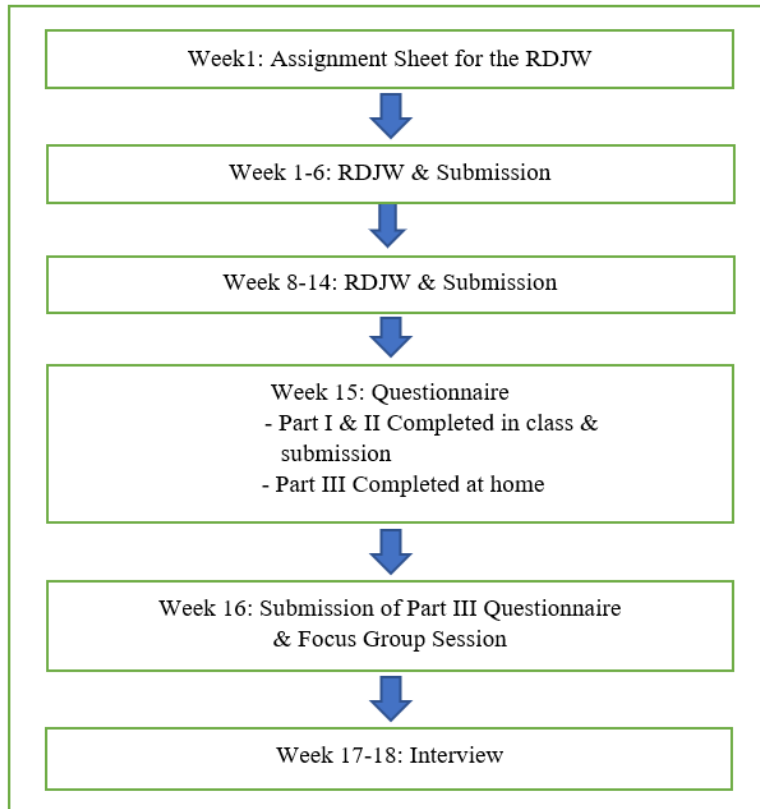


Figure 1 Data collection procedure

The Questionnaire: The first two parts of the questionnaire were completed in class, whereas the open-ended questions, the third part, were done at their convenience outside the class time and were returned a week later. During the last class, the students were asked to form focus groups of 5 to 6. The focus group was implemented to obtain qualitative data while focusing on the “multivocality of participants’ attitudes” (Madriz, 2000, p. 836). The students were asked to discuss their answers to the 5 open-ended questions of the questionnaire which they had received a week earlier. During the focus group discussion, the teacher circulated around the class to answer any questions that came up during the discussion and to gauge the students’ responses for more reflections on what they thought. This process repeated until every question was discussed. Each focus group discussion was audio-recorded for further analysis.

The Semi-Structured Interview: The semi-structured interview, each of which lasted about half an hour, was conducted one-on-one in order that each student might feel comfortable revealing his/her true feelings. It was done to triangulate the data and to get insight into the students’ thoughts and practices. The interview was, in fact, based on the questions used for the focus group session so that the students could add further information in detail, clarify and elaborate on some points or give further examples of the incidents mentioned during the focus group discussion. The interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Because there are some international students in the class, the interview was conducted in the language of the student’s choice – English or Thai.

Data analysis

The discussions from both the focus group session and the interview sessions were audio-recorded and then transcribed for qualitative analysis. All responses and opinions were anonymous. All names presented in this report are pseudonyms. In addition, the data from the 5-point Likert scale questionnaire were quantitatively analyzed, using descriptive statistics. According to Pimentel (2019), the mean scores (\bar{x}) were interpreted as follows:

4.20 - 5.00	=	Very high
3.40 - 4.19	=	High
2.60 - 3.39	=	Average
1.80 - 2.59	=	Low
1.00 - 1.79	=	Very low

The students' responses from the open-ended questionnaire and from the semi-structured interview were analyzed using content analysis to further examine the students' perceptions towards RDJW, and their reflections on their learning and their writing development. The content analysis was done to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts so that their presence, meanings, and relationships can be revealed and categorized into aspects that described students' perceptions and reflections.

To quantitatively evaluate the writing fluency of the students participating in the study, the number of words written in their journals during the 13 weeks of data collection period was collected and a quantity-based indicator was employed to analyze the data. That is, based on the measurement used by many researchers, writing fluency was measured using the total number of words or length of a text produced in the students' journals (Biria & Jafari, 2013; Elola, 2010; Rattanaintanin, 2017; Wolfe-Quintero, 1998; Zabihi & Rezazadeh, 2013). Of the 13 journal entries completed, six journal entries from the first six weeks were grouped together (G1) and the six journal entries from the last six weeks were grouped together (G2) for analysis. Finally, a paired t-test was employed to compare the mean difference between the average number of words in G1 and that in G2 to ascertain whether the reflective dialogue journal writing helped improve the students' writing fluency.

FINDINGS

The study revealed the following:

I. Students' perceptions towards RDJW

Table 1
Students' perception towards RDJW

Statement	\bar{x}	S.D.	Attitudes
Section I. Perceptions towards journal writing			
1. The Journal writing task opens a new channel of communication between the students and the teacher.	4.73	0.44	Very High
2. Using journals to communicate with the teacher makes communication easier.	4.65	0.49	Very High
3. Journals help build good relationships between the teacher and students.	4.53	0.61	Very High
4. I like writing journals because I can focus more on the content I want to communicate than on the correctness of my grammar.	4.47	0.51	Very High
5. The teacher gets to know me better through my journal.	4.79	0.41	Very High
6. I feel comfortable talking about my strengths, obstacles, and needs in my journal.	4.53	0.56	Very High
7. I see journals as a tool for two-way communication.	4.47	0.51	Very High
8. I like to use journals to communicate with my teacher because I can express my ideas with ease.	4.29	0.72	Very High
9. Through journals, I can ask the teacher questions as well as answer the teacher's questions back and forth continuously.	4.35	0.49	Very High
10. I like the journal writing activity because I can choose by myself what to write.	4.41	0.74	Very High
Average	4.52	0.55	Very High

It could be concluded, based on Table 1, that the graduate students expressed very highly positive attitudes towards RDJW after participating RDJW for 13 weeks. In fact, none of the students reported or showed any signs of negative attitudes towards RDJW. The mean scores ranged from 4.29 to 4.79.

The students viewed RDJW as a two-way communication ($\bar{x} = 4.47$) with the teacher in writing ($\bar{x} = 4.73$) where they could take turns asking and answering questions with the teacher ($\bar{x} = 4.35$). RDJW held the potential to make communication between the students and the teacher easier ($\bar{x} = 4.65$) and offered the students opportunities to express themselves with ease ($\bar{x} = 4.29$). Furthermore, RDJW was beneficial to them because it allowed them to choose what to write ($\bar{x} = 4.41$) as well as to focus more on the message, not the correctness ($\bar{x} = 4.47$). By communicating through journals which contained private written dialogue between the teacher and the student, the students were encouraged to talk about their strengths, obstacles, and needs ($\bar{x} = 4.53$). RDJW also held the potential to promote reflection and openness from

both sides in a dialogue exchange, hence building strong relationships between them ($\bar{x} = 4.53$). It is worth noting that the highest mean scores came from item 5 ($\bar{x} = 4.79$), identifying that through RDJW, they became acquainted with the teacher.

Based on the content analysis, the study revealed students' perceptions in the following aspects:

Experience, information, ideas, and emotion sharing. Graduate students in this study came to class with extensive experience and different levels of language skills. Although they were reluctant to share their background, interests, and needs in their first couple of journals, they became more relaxed over time to talk about themselves or to share stories of what happened to them in the week.

"I didn't know what to write in the beginning but now I wish I do [sic] the same in my other classes because teachers would (have) understood me more. I have so many things to tell the teacher. Sometimes, I even complained about my other classes and (about) what disappoint [sic] or annoyed me."

Lu, a student from Vietnam, shared her thoughts with her friends during the focus group discussion.

A lot of them found RDJW to be a crucial and beneficial part of the class. The journals opened new channels of communication where the students could build strong personal and intellectual bonds with the teacher. RDJW also extended the time that the teacher can spend with individual students as mentioned in the focus group discussion and during the interview:

"If I have a question or don't understand the lesson, I'll write in my journal because we may not have time to ask in class." (Chat)

"I agree. I also told her my problems." (Hang)

"Yes, it's good. We can talk to her in the journals." (Pon)

"I'd like to tell you (the teacher) about me or ask you (her) questions in my journal. I can't wait to read your (her) responses too." (Pad)

In one focus group discussion, students talked about the bond they have with their teacher.

"I feel like I'm close to the teacher. There are many students in the class; not everyone can talk to the teacher in the class. But the teacher can remember us all because of the journals." (Ben)

"I feel free to talk to her about my feeling. It's not easy to do that. This class is the only class that [sic] I can say what I'm worried about, how I feel, (and) what I'm impressed (with). I can tell her everything. I like it a lot." (Sa)

"It's very personal. She gave me advice for my problem. This encourage [sic] me to move on. It's not just about studying anymore. It's more about me, my feeling, my life." (Dul)

Similar responses were found during the interview.

“I love the way you talk to me in writing. It’s like we are talking to each other and it’s our conversation, not others’ conversation.” (Na)

“I told you something that I (had) never told anybody.” (Wan)

Because RDJW offered an opportunity for two-way communication, the teacher and a student could exchange ideas or even feelings about a topic they were both interested in as shown in the following excerpts:

“During the royal cremation ceremony, I told her that I felt so sad and she also shared her feeling.” (Pad)

“I told her I felt bad this week because one of my staff lied to me.” (Poom)

“Once I was upset and worried about my studies. So, I wrote a lot about how I feel. [sic]” (Na)

One student mentioned in the interview,

“Do you remember the book I told you about? I read the book and you asked me to share the story of the book. This shows [sic] that you really listen [sic] to me and we keep [sic] talking about this book in the next and next journals too. This is real.” (Wan)

When asked what they liked most about journal writing, out of 34 students, 27 gave credits to writing improvement. They realized that because of the journal writing activity they learned to write better. Some students expressed their excitement when seeing that they could write their journals more than one paragraph. Others confirmed that they were no longer afraid of English writing. In addition to writing, some students revealed that they enjoyed reading the teacher’s responses.

“I love her feedback. I can feel the warm relationship between the teacher and me.” (Dul)

“I cannot wait to read her responses. Every week I wait to see her feedback on my journal. I’m curious to learn what she writes to me.” (Ben)

“Her feedback gives me encouragement. It inspires me. It makes me feel that writing is not boring. It’s not that difficult. She told me to keep writing and it will be better and it really works. I love that. I love to know that she reads my journal and answer (respond) to my journal. I love this activity. It works.” (Pad)

Improvement of Learning and Instruction. Regarding classroom instruction, some students mentioned how the classroom instruction changed because of the students’ journals.

“Perhaps journal writing is a channel for the teacher to see our problems. She usually teach [sic] other topics in the next class. (But) She explained the last topic again because I asked her in my journal.” (Patra)

“She knew my problems and she talked about it again in the class. So, I understood more. She really cared, you know?” (Chai)

“When sometimes I felt this topic was difficult. I wrote to the teacher to ask her to repeat the topic again next week and she did. She also speaks [sic] slowly too.” (Poom)

Challenges and fear. A few students mentioned the amount of time they spent on writing their journals. For example, Hang, a student from Myanmar, said

“I know it’s a good thing to do, but I have a lot of homework from other classes. I spent a lot of time trying to finish my journal. My English is not good. I have to think again and again.”

At the beginning of the semester when RDJW was introduced to the students, most students expressed their worries in the journals. Some said they did not know what to write while others were worried about correctness. Many of them intended to keep the journal short to avoid making errors in their journals.

However, their fear and worries decreased over time as revealed by the length of their journals which tended to be longer. Moreover, starting from week 3 onwards, students stopped complaining about the time spent on writing journals. Instead, they reported that they spent less time on writing while producing longer pieces of writing.

II. The role of journal writing on students’ writing fluency

A total of 204 journal entries from each group (G1 & G2) were examined. As shown in Table 2, the mean difference of G1 ($\bar{x} = 535.1373$, $SD = 148.60522$) and that of G2 ($\bar{x} = 685.6667$, $SD = 126.89391$) was 150.5294. The paired t-test showed that there was a statistical difference in the number of words written in the journal entries of G1 and in the journal entries of G2. This indicated that the students improved their writing fluency in terms of word length after the 13-week RDJW. The result from the quantitative analysis was consistent with the findings found from the questionnaire, the interview, and the focus group.

Table 2
Pair t-test

Group	N	\bar{x}	S.D.	t
G 1	34	535.1373	148.60522	-10.702*
G 2	34	685.6667	126.89391	

*p < .05

Although RDJW did not focus on correct form, students became more fluent over time as they continued to write and read the teacher’s writing which serves as models of language form and structure. Oftentimes, rather than correcting their writing, the teacher rephrased what the students wrote in order to give them models of correct sentences, phrases, or proper word choices. By doing that, the teacher hoped the students would notice it and improve their

writing accordingly. In addition, because the teacher's responses were related to what the students wrote in their journals, the journals became reading texts that were contextualized and meaningful to each student.

Based on the data collected from the questionnaire, Table 3 shows the mean scores of students' reflections on RDJW and on their English writing skills. The graduate students in the study felt that RDJW helped them improve their writing skills ($\bar{x} = 4.59$), made writing easier over time ($\bar{x} = 4.53$), made writing less scary to them ($\bar{x} = 4.38$), and motivated them to like writing more ($\bar{x} = 4.44$). They also thought that because of RDJW, they focused more on communication than on accuracy ($\bar{x} = 4.47$), became more confident in English writing ($\bar{x} = 4.38$), and performed more actual writing ($\bar{x} = 4.79$). In addition, the graduate students expressed that they enjoyed writing more than before ($\bar{x} = 4.53$) because they had the freedom to choose what to write ($\bar{x} = 4.5$). In addition, all students confirmed that writing a journal entry every week allowed them to practice writing consistently ($\bar{x} = 4.68$)

Table 3
Students' reflections on RDJW and English writing skills

Statement	\bar{x}	S.D.	Attitudes
Section II. Reflections on Journal Writing and English Writing Skills			
1. The journal writing task helps me improve my writing skill.	4.59	0.61	Very High
2. The journal writing task makes writing easier over time.	4.53	0.56	Very High
3. I can write more in my journal because I have the freedom to choose what to write.	4.5	0.62	Very High
4. Writing my journal every week allows me to practice writing English consistently.	4.68	0.47	Very High
5. I feel that I enjoy English writing more than before.	4.53	0.56	Very High
6. When writing a journal, I focus more on communication than on accuracy.	4.47	0.66	Very High
7. Through the journal writing task, writing becomes less scary to me.	4.38	0.65	Very High
8. Because of the journal writing task, I have done more actual writing than I have ever done before.	4.79	0.41	Very High
9. As I continue to read the teacher's written feedback, I feel more confident in expressing myself in written English.	4.38	0.60	Very High
10. The journal writing task motivates me to like writing more than before.	4.44	0.61	Very High
Average	4.53	0.58	Very High

According to the discussion from the focus group, many students reported that they developed their confidence in expressing themselves in writing. One student explained,

"I'm surprised to see that I wrote so much. That's like tens of pages. In the past, I like to talk, not to write, especially in English. I didn't like writing at all. But when I wrote journals and the teacher gave me comments, it was encouraging. I was encouraged to continue writing my journal. Although there were errors, the teacher didn't mind them. I am happy." (Pad)

The students' early journals were mostly short and descriptive about what they had learned in class. There were rarely opinions involved. It was also obvious that they just tried to fulfill the assignment and that they did not have confidence in their writing skills. Therefore, they kept their writing short to avoid making mistakes. Some students even wrote in their journals saying that they seldom wrote anything in English and asked the teacher to correct their writing for them.

After 3-4 journals, the students became more confident and enjoyed writing more. In addition, their writing seemed more natural. The students' journal entries revealed several important points regarding their writing fluency.

First, they wrote longer entries and felt more at ease when writing. Second, students used longer sentences. Third, the students used more transitional words, such as *in addition*, *moreover*, and *however* to link their ideas. A student wrote in the open-ended questionnaire,

"I think I use more connectors in the journal. I learned that from the class and I used them."

Fourth, in terms of vocabulary, RDJW can be a good way to improve the students' vocabulary. As revealed in the interview,

"I think I can choose the word and some vocabulary to use in the sentence better. And when I find some new words, I feel I want to know the meaning more than in the past."
(Nok)

"I search for new vocabulary or the similar vocabulary that makes my vocabulary increase." (Ben)

"I feel like I can select word choice better and more quickly. I'm also enthusiastic in searching for more new vocabulary." (Rak)

"I've gained more vocabulary, especially during the royal cremation, I wanted to write about this. So, I had to look for new words, royal words." (Pad)

What the students reported showed how they conceptualized what they were doing while writing. They reported not only knowing what difficulties they had but also showing what they could do to solve the problems. Furthermore, they did not give up when they did not know some words in English. On the contrary, they searched for the words and learned to use them. This showed how students were willing to write and improve their writing. Since their purpose was clear in that they wrote to deliver their messages to the teacher, the students revealed their attempts in writing their journals. Based on the results from both quantitative and qualitative analyses, the writing fluency of the graduate students in this study improved significantly after being involved in actual and consistent writing through RDJW.

III. Students' self-awareness of their English language learning and writing development

Table 4
Students' reflection on English language learning

Statements	\bar{x}	S.D.	Attitudes
III. Reflection on English Language Learning			
1. The journal writing task makes me aware of my own English language learning.	4.44	0.61	Very High
2. The journal writing task encourages me to be critical of what I have learned.	4.32	0.64	Very High
3. Journals give me opportunities to reflect on my learning.	4.59	0.56	Very High
4. Journal entries give both the teacher and me continual feedback about what I understand or don't understand in class.	4.5	0.62	Very High
5. The journal writing task allows me to reflect on what I know/don't know and what I can/can't do.	4.47	0.56	Very High
6. The journal writing task enhances my ability to problematize my own learning issues.	4.38	0.60	Very High
7. When I write about my own learning process, I have improved my practical reasoning skill.	4.29	0.58	Very High
8. Doing the journal writing task can help me monitor the progress as well as the difficulties of my learning.	4.18	0.63	High
9. I often write about how I use English in real-life situations.	4.44	0.50	Very High
10. Thinking about my achievement of the week really motivates me to improve my English ability.	4.53	0.56	Very High
Average	4.41	0.59	Very High

Students' self-awareness of their English Language learning. RDJW revealed its value in developing students' practice of self-reflective awareness of their own learning. When they critiqued classroom practices or assignments in their journals, it was obvious that they had to review their thoughts and express their opinions, thus promoting their own learning.

According to Table 4, the graduate students realized that RDJW made them aware of their own learning ($\bar{x} = 4.44$), encouraged them to be critical of what they had learned ($\bar{x} = 4.32$), and give them opportunities to reflect on their learning ($\bar{x} = 4.59$). Their reflection on what they learned or not learned facilitated their personal and reflective perspectives and initiated as well as encouraged self-awareness. Knowing what they knew or what they did not know refers to metacognitive awareness which is important for good learners. As shown in Table 4, the students agreed that in their journals they included how they used English in real-life situations ($\bar{x} = 4.44$), therefore indicating that they were aware of their own learning and doing.

It should be noted that item 8 in Table 4 had the least mean score ($\bar{x} = 4.18$). This may be because most of the graduate students might not realize at the beginning that doing the journal writing task could help them monitor their progress as well as the difficulties of their learning. However, they were prompted by the questionnaire and were made aware of this fact. This finding should not be surprising as monitoring one's own learning or self-monitoring is considered

as an advanced skill that requires students to take greater responsibility for their own learning. Although it can help them develop their skill of learning to learn (metacognition) or their understanding of what is required to succeed, it is not common for everyone to regulate or to know how to regulate their own learning. In conclusion, based on their responses in the 5-point Likert scale questionnaire, the graduate students found RDJW to be a highly useful tool to reflect on their English language learning ($\bar{x} = 4.41$, $SD = 0.59$).

“I feel like I have improved the way I sequence my thoughts. From the first day when I didn’t know what to write until the last day when I wrote my last piece, I know how to sequence my thoughts.” (Lu)

“... Writing my journal gives me an opportunity to review the lesson of the week. Actually, I think it is very important. I have to admit that there have never been any courses that I sit down after class to review the lesson each week. I can also assess myself to see whether I understand the lesson or not.” (Hang)

According to the open-ended questionnaire, the journal writing task helped the students become aware of the improvement of their practical reasoning skills, make use of what they had learned in class, develop their English abilities, and enhance their ability to monitor their own learning issues. It was also found from the journal entries that the students often reflected on what they know, what they don’t know, what they can do, and what they cannot do.

Students’ reflection on their writing development. From the students’ responses in the open-ended questionnaire, it was found that in the view of the students, they noticed changes in their journals as the semester unfolded.

“I wrote more and more as the time [sic] went by.” (Kao)

“I feel better about writing. I spent less time to write [sic] and to finish [sic] writing my journal. I’m also getting used to different sentence types which were new topics to me. (Su)

“(Having) compared the first writing and the last (one), I realize my writing (has been) improving. I write [sic] more and I have more stories to write about. I have improved my vocabulary and sentence knowledge. I’ve used new words and sentence types I have learned.” (Chat)

In describing the improvement in their writing fluency, during the interview, the students often used the words such as ‘better,’ ‘easier,’ ‘improve,’ ‘less time,’ ‘more,’ ‘comfortable,’ and ‘new.’ Ladda confirmed that her increasing fluency occurred due to her regular journal writing.

“For me, before writing the journal, I have never written anything in English. After writing my journal, I think I have skills for writing because I write every week. Just write and write.”

When asked whether they think the journal writing task helped them write better and contributed to their growing writing fluency, all students agreed that it did contribute to their improved fluency. For instance, Wan noticed a change in her writing:

“At the beginning, it was very very difficult. I didn’t know what to write, but when I started writing weeks after weeks, now I can write in English. It is not difficult. Now it’s not. I used more connectors. In the past, I just put words after words – no connections. Now I can write in sentences with connectors.” (Wan)

Similarly, other students also mentioned about [sic] their development in writing:

“For me, I notice something in my writing from the first one and I see my improvement along the way, such as my grammar or my spelling.” (Poom)

“I think I (have) developed myself a lot. I can say I’m growing one by one step because I can check grammar or sentence(s) or something that I can correct by myself before submit(ing) my journal to the teacher.” (Mas)

To sum up, graduate students in the study expressed an awareness of their English language learning and the development of their writing skills. They were aware of what they were doing while monitoring their learning. This involved evaluation and regulation of their learning processes. RDJW was, therefore, found to be an effective tool for students to monitor their own learning. When they looked back into their journals, they learned and realized how much their writing skill had improved. This is because their journal entries became tangible evidence of their writing development. In addition, the students’ journal entries revealed records of events that happened to them in learning English. They also revealed the students’ self-expression of what they learned or did not learn and what confused them, as seen from the following excerpts:

“After I finished my job, I reviewed all (the) English lessons that I learned. I spend [sic] two hours before I sleep. I think (the) paraphrasing section is very difficult. I need to study again and again, but I still don’t understand. What should I do? I’m thinking of have [sic] a study group. My friends can help me.” (Su)

“This week I learn(ed) how to analyze research articles. There are [sic] many things I did not know before. So, I will read more research article(s) and I will understand more.” (Nat)

“When I do [sic] (my) homework, I pay [sic] attention to do it. It is [sic] hard. I review [sic] all topics again by myself. I think I can [sic] understand more when I finish [sic] Exercise 6. I will try to improve my English skills because nowadays English is very important for my work and (my) life.” (San)

As the students were writing down their journal entries, they self-reflect on and learned from their past experiences. Their reflective journals helped them identify important learning events that happened to them. Through RDJW, the students reflected on what they had learned, what concerned them, and what they would do to improve their learning.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The objective of the study was to examine graduate students' perceptions towards RDJW. Additionally, the study aimed to explore whether RDJW helped graduate students improve their writing fluency and develop an awareness of their own English language learning. Overall, the findings from the questionnaire, the focus group, the interview, and the journal entries provided support for the need to actively employ RDJW to help EFL graduate students develop their writing skills and self-awareness of their English language learning.

Since the students held positive attitudes toward RDJW, they showed enthusiasm for participating in the RDJW activity and willingness to communicate in written English. In addition, as RDJW engaged them in an actual writing task, they developed their writing fluency through written communication with the teacher. By focusing on the content for communication, the students were stimulated to write more. As a result, it can be inferred that RDJW has the potential in building EFL graduate students' writing fluency, and in turn, it gradually builds their confidence toward writing. Rokni and Seifi (2013) also confirmed that through journals, students became less anxious and gained more writing confidence. Based on the present study's findings, the value of using RDJW entries for evaluating students' writing progress is two-fold. For teachers, students' journal entries become unassisted, unedited evidence of student writing. For students, looking back through their journal entries, they can learn about their writing progress because their journals prove the progress of their writing skills and confirm their writing competence. As a matter of fact, teachers' responses to their students' journals also create opportunities for the students not just to write about what they wanted but also to read for meaning (Head, 2016; Johnson & Cheng, 2019). Students write to deliver their messages and then read their teachers' responses in a collaborative situation of genuine two-way communication. That is, RDJW allows students to frequently practice their reading and writing skills in an authentic situation with a clear purpose for communication.

In addition, while exploring and expressing their thoughts, the students in the study reflected on their own learning, showing how they dealt with learning problems in and outside the classroom or how they improved their English language learning, for example. It can then be concluded that RDJW can be a tool for teachers to engage students in thinking about their own learning and in identifying their learning needs. It also helps teachers to better understand students' learning process as well as their strengths and weaknesses. Chisea and Bailey (2015) pointed out that dialogue journals provided teachers with an effective way to understand their students' Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) and to identify their needs. In fact, journals provide concrete evidence of students' work and keep teachers on track with their students' learning. Having students write about what they have learned, what they understand, and what they do not understand in class is an excellent way for teachers to assess students' learning as well as to evaluate their own teaching. (Head, 2016; Johnson & Cheng, 2019; Khairunnisa, 2018; Rattanaintanin, 2017).

Limitations and suggestions for future research and pedagogical implications

Although the study has confirmed the effectiveness of using RDJW with adult EFL students, some limitations should be taken into consideration. First, writing fluency in this study was measured by the number of words written in the students' journal entries regardless of writing accuracy and time spent completing the task. Therefore, the improvement in writing fluency found does not imply an improvement in writing accuracy. Future research may include writing accuracy in the investigation. It is worth seeing whether graduate students' writing accuracy can improve due to RDJW. In a classroom situation, the teacher may need to provide feedback on students' frequent common written errors as well as feedback on content.

In addition, although the teacher did not specify or limit the time spent on the task as it was not an in-class activity, most students clearly reported in the interview and the focus group that over time they spent less time writing their journals. Even so, it will be interesting to see whether adding 'time' as an independent variable can affect students' writing fluency. That is, within the time limit (e.g., 15 or 20 minutes), can students improve their writing fluency over time?

Next, because RDJW was implemented for only 13 weeks out of the 17-week duration of a semester, it cannot be inferred that the positive influences of RDJW shown in this study can have a long-term effect unless the students continue writing their journals. Clearly, students' writing fluency increases as they are involved in consistent journal writing. As a result, encouraging students to keep their journal writing activity is recommended even though they are not required to do so anymore. However, to include journal writing activity in a classroom requires teachers to spend time giving feedback to each journal throughout a semester or an academic year. Although giving feedback or reflecting on substances of students' journal entries is essential as it helps students in various aspects (Dabbagh, 2017), giving feedback to each journal entry is time-consuming. Therefore, teachers should plan ahead and manage their time wisely. Teachers should always set their purpose(s) for implementing journal writing in class. Without any purpose, the journal writing task is meaningless (Head, 2016).

Establishing a trusting relationship between the teacher and the students can also change student attitudes and make them willing to do the task and not see the task as a burden. Therefore, grading students' journal entries is not recommended. Instead, showing students how journal writing can help them communicate with their teacher in a dialogue style while practicing English writing may attract them to see the meaningfulness of the journal writing task.

Moreover, technology is at hand and most students are comfortable incorporating it into their daily lives and studies. Future research may explore how online journals can be implemented with EFL graduate students. Besides, exchanging or sharing journals among peers may be another interesting issue to explore.

All in all, journal writing holds great potential for enhancing students' learning and writing fluency; however, to use journal writing to the fullest, teachers must seek effective strategies and planning before incorporating it into the class.



THE AUTHOR

Reongrudee Maneepakhathorn is currently an Assistant Professor teaching both undergraduate and graduate courses at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute, Bangkok, Thailand. She obtained her Ph.D. in Reading Education from the State University of New York, Buffalo, NY. Her fields of interests include EFL teaching, alternative assessments, English for Academic Purposes, and reading and writing instructions.

reongrudee@yahoo.com

REFERENCES

- Abednia, A., Hovassapian, A., Teimournezhad, S., & Ghanbari, N. (2013). Reflective journal writing: Exploring in-service EFL teachers' perceptions. *System*, 41, 503-514.
- Ahmed, A. M. (2019). Students' reflective journaling: An impactful strategy that informs instructional practices in an EFL writing university context in Qatar. *International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 20(4), 483-500. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14623943.2019.1638246>
- Anderson, J. (2012). Reflective journals as a tool for auto-ethnographic learning: A case study of student experiences with individualized sustainability. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 36(4), 613-623.
- Armstrong, K. M. (2010). Fluency, accuracy and complexity in graded and ungraded writing. *Foreign Language Annals*, 43(4), 690-702.
- Biria, R., & Jafari, S. (2013). The impact of collaborative writing on the writing fluency of Iranian EFL learners. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 4(1), 164-175.
- Bonzo, J. D. (2008). To assign a topic or not: Observing fluency in intermediate foreign language writing. *Foreign Language Annals*, 41, 722-735.
- Brown, D. H. (1994). *Principle of language teaching and learning*. Prentice Hall Regent.
- Chenoweth, N. A., & Hayes, J. R. (2001). Fluency in writing: Generating text in L1 and L2. *Written Communication*, 18(1), 80-98.
- Chiesa, D. L., & Bailey, K. M. (2015). Dialogue Journal. In D. Nunan & J. C. Richards (Eds.), *Language learning beyond the classroom* (pp. 53-62). Routledge.
- Cone, L. (2016). *Confronting writing anxiety*. University of Richmond Writing Center. <http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/writinganxietyprint.html>
- Dabbagh, A. (2017). The effect of dialogue journal writing on EFL learners' descriptive writing performance: A quantitative study. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 6(3), 71-80. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v6n.3p.71>
- Dengub, E. (2012). *Investigating syntactic and lexical complexity, accuracy and fluency in the writing of heritage speakers of Russian* [Doctoral dissertation, Bryn Mawr College]. <http://repository.brynmawr.edu/dissertations>
- Ellis, R., & Yuan, F. (2004). The effects of planning on fluency, complexity and accuracy in second language narrative writing. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 26(1), 59-84.
- Elola, I. (2010). Collaborative writing: Fostering foreign language and writing conventions development. *Language Learning & Technology*, 14(3), 51-71.
- English, L. M., & Gillen, M. A. (Eds.). (2001). *Promoting journal writing in adult education. New Direction for Adult and Continuing Education*, 90. Jossey-Bass.
- Foroutan, M., Noordin, N., & Hamzah, M. S. (2013). How can dialogue journal writing improve learners' writing performance in the English as a second language context? *Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 7(2), 35-42. <https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-0723542>

- Gilliland, B. (2021). 6 Ways to build fluency in second language writing. *TESOL Blog*. <http://blog.tesol.org/6-ways-to-build-fluency-in-second-language-writing/>
- HarperCollins. (n.d.). Fluency. In Collins English dictionary. Retrieved October 10, 2022, from <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/fluency>
- Head, P. (2016). Introducing freewriting to a Japanese high school English class. In P. Clements, A. Krause & H. Brown (Eds.), *Focus on the learner*. JALT. https://jalt-publications.org/files/pdf-article/jalt2015-pcp_013.pdf
- Holmes, B., Waterbury, T., Baltrinic, E., & Davis, A. (2018). Angst about academic writing: Graduate students at the brink. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, 11(2), 65-70.
- Isserlis, J. L. (1991). Dialogue journal writing as part of a learner-centered curriculum. In J. P. Peyton & J. Staton (Eds.), *Writing our lives: Reflecting on dialogue journal writing with adults learning English* (pp. 45-51). Prentice Hall.
- Johnson, M. D., Mercado, L., & Acevedo, A. (2012). The effect of pre-task planning sub- processes on L2 writing fluency, grammatical complexity and lexical complexity. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 21(3), 264–282.
- Johnson, S., & Cheng, B. (2019). The effectiveness of dialogue journal writing on the writing ability of Japanese learners of English. *Language, Culture and Communication*, 11, 97-128. https://icc.rikkyo.ac.jp/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/bulletin_2019_04.pdf
- Khairunnisa, H. (2018). The effects of dialogue journal writing (DJW) in engaging and empowering writing skill. *The Asian EFL Journal*, 11(20), 224-230. <https://www.asian-efl-journal.com/monthly-editions-new/2018-teaching-articles/volume-20-issue-11-2018/index.htm>
- Kim, J. (2005). A community within the classroom: Dialogue journal writing of adult ESL learners. *Adult Basic Education*, 15(1), 21-32.
- Lagan, J. (2000). *College writing skills*. Longman.
- Lannin, A. A. (2007). *Freewriting for fluency and flow in eighth and ninth grade reading classes* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri]. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/304839578>
- Madriz, E. (2000). Focus groups in feminist research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 835–850). Sage.
- Merc, A. (2016). Research anxiety among Turkish graduate ELT students. *Current Issues in Education*, 19(1), 1-15. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297573095_Research_Anxiety_among_Turkish_Graduate_ELT_Students
- Myers, J. L. (2001). Self-evaluations of the “stream of thought” in journal writing. *System*, 29, 481-488.
- Patterson, D. (2013). Using writing journals as a means of increasing EFL writing fluency. *Proceedings of ICLC 2013: The 5th International Conference on Language & Communication*, 81-91. https://www.academia.edu/7297345/Using_Writing_Journals_as_a_Means_of_Increasing_EFL_Writing_Fluency
- Pavlovich, K. (2007). The development of reflective practice through student journals. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 26(3), 281–295.
- Peyton, J. K. (2000). Dialogue journals: Interactive writing to develop language and literacy. *ERIC Digest*. National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education. http://www.cal.org/nclie/digests/Dialogue_Journals.html
- Rattanaintanin, S. (2017). *Using dialogue journals to enhance students’ writing ability and willingness to orally communicate*. Prince of Songkla University. <https://kb.psu.ac.th/psukb/bitstream/2016/11729/1/420129.pdf>
- Reed, L. (1993). Opening the door to communication in the multilingual/multicultural classroom. In J. K. Peyton & J. Staton (Eds.), *Dialogue journals in the multilingual classroom: Building fluency and writing skills through written interaction* (pp. 219-246). Ablex.
- Rodgers, C. (2002). Defining reflection: Another look at John Dewey and reflective thinking. *Teachers College Record*, 104(4), 842–866.



- Rogers, R. (2001). Reflection in higher education: A concept analysis. *Innovative Higher Education*, 26(1), 37–57.
- Rokni, S. J. A., & Seifi, A. (2013). The effect of dialog journal writing on EFL learners' grammar knowledge. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 9(2), 57-67.
- Semke, H. D. (1984). Effects of the red pen. *Foreign Language Annals*, 17(3), 195-202.
- Staton, J. (1980). Writing and counseling: Using a dialogue journal. *Language Arts*, 57, 514-518.
- Staton, J., Shuy, R. W., Peyton, J. K., & Reed, L. (Eds.). *Dialogue journal communication: Classroom, linguistic, social, and cognitive views*. Ablex.
- Tuan, L. T. (2010). Enhancing EFL learners' writing skill via journal writing. *English Language Teaching*, 3(3), 81-88.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind and society: The development of higher psychological processes*. (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds. & Trans.). Harvard University Press.
- Watson, D. (2010). Teaching teachers to think: Reflective journaling as a strategy to enhance students' understanding and practice of academic writing. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning*, 7(12), 11–18.
- Wolfe-Quintero, K., Inagaki, S., & Kim, H. Y. (1998). *Second language development in writing: Measures of fluency, accuracy and complexity*. University of Hawaii at Manoa.
- Zabihi, R., & Rezazadeh, M. (2013). Creativity and narrative writing in L2 classrooms: Comparing individual and paired task performance. *Bellaterra Journal of Teaching & Learning Language & Literature*, 6(3), 29–46.