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VOICES OF EFL UNIVERSITY LEARNERS THROUGH DIGITAL REFLECTIVE JOURNALS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF LEARNING MOTIVATION IN CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING COURSES

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate the effect of digital reflective journals on the motivation of English as a foreign language (EFL) university students in the cross-cultural understanding (CCU) course. This study involved 6 EFL students who enrolled in the CCU class, where they were required to write reflective journals digitally at the end of the teaching and learning process. This study employed semi-structured interviews as the data collection instrument, adapted from the Self-determination Theory. The students' responses were then analyzed through 7 main stages: familiarization with the collected data, generating initial codes, reviewing the obtained themes, defining themes, identifying the most significant quotes, and writing up. The findings of this study showed that digital reflective journals functioned positively as a pedagogical tool in fostering students' motivation in CCU courses. The tool successfully helped EFL learners shift their emotions from anxiety to adaptability, enabling them to engage in a meaningful learning process through ongoing use of digital reflective journals. Furthermore, the students also assumed that this valuable tool encouraged them to be autonomous learners, to monitor their academic progress, and to strengthen their connection with educators. Given its impact on students' motivation, this tool can be considered for implementation in the EFL classroom context. Future researchers are suggested to explore large-scale participants, combining this with a mixed-methods research design to achieve analytical generalizability of research findings.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Understanding Courses, Digital Reflective Journals, EFL University Learners, Learning Motivation

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini dilakukan untuk menyelidiki pengaruh jurnal reflektif digital terhadap motivasi mahasiswa Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL) di mata kuliah Pemahaman Lintas Budaya (CCU). Penelitian ini melibatkan 6 mahasiswa EFL yang terdaftar di kelas CCU, di mana mereka diharuskan menulis jurnal reflektif secara digital di akhir proses pembelajaran. Penelitian ini menggunakan wawancara semi-terstruktur sebagai instrumen pengumpulan data, yang diadaptasi dari Teori Penentuan Diri. Tanggapan mahasiswa kemudian dianalisis melalui 7 tahap utama: pengenalan data yang dikumpulkan, pembuatan kode awal, peninjauan tema yang diperoleh, pendefinisian tema, identifikasi kutipan yang paling signifikan, dan penulisan. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa jurnal reflektif digital berfungsi positif sebagai alat pedagogis dalam meningkatkan motivasi mahasiswa di mata kuliah CCU. Alat ini berhasil membantu pembelajar EFL menggeser emosi mereka dari kecemasan ke kemampuan beradaptasi, memungkinkan mereka untuk terlibat dalam proses pembelajaran yang bermakna melalui penggunaan jurnal reflektif digital secara berkelanjutan. Lebih lanjut, para siswa juga berasumsi bahwa alat berharga ini mendorong mereka untuk menjadi pembelajar mandiri, memantau kemajuan akademik mereka, dan memperkuat hubungan mereka dengan pendidik. Mengingat dampaknya pada motivasi siswa, alat ini dapat dipertimbangkan untuk diimplementasikan dalam konteks kelas EFL. Peneliti masa depan disarankan untuk mengeksplorasi partisipan dalam skala besar, menggabungkannya dengan desain penelitian metode campuran untuk mencapai generalisasi analitis dari temuan penelitian.



Kata kunci: *Pengajaran Pemahaman Lintas Budaya, Jurnal Reflektif Digital, Mahasiswa EFL, Motivasi Belajar*

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INTRODUCTION

Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) has become a compulsory course unit in English Language Teaching (Pratama, 2017). This course unit must be enrolled in by EFL university learners in the first semester, along with the other four basic language skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. According to Syam and Susanti (2024), CCU is an academic course designed to equip university students with English skills and intercultural competence to communicate effectively with individuals from various cultures. This subject is important because it fosters global awareness, empathy, and tolerance while helping students engage with and learn from diverse cultures (Basori et al., 2023; Erlinda Syam & Susi Susanti, 2024). Without sufficient cultural competence, possible challenges may arise, such as a lack of respect for people from different cultural backgrounds and miscommunication, which may lead to unfavorable communication issues (Basori et al., 2023). Hence, CCU must be involved as part of a curriculum to learn a new foreign language.

Learning a new foreign language means learning the culture. As stated by Nur, Sunra, and Patak (2022), teaching English as a foreign language alone is insufficient without also teaching the culture of the target language. In English language teaching (ELT), incorporating culture to achieve intercultural competence can be an arduous task because the students are not only focusing on learning about linguistic knowledge, but also on comprehending how the native speakers of the target language express ideas, beliefs, and customs of their community (Fageeh, 2011; Ratnasari, 2019). It is clearly stated that having adequate knowledge of linguistic rules enhances the correctness of sentence structure; however, understanding cultural knowledge contributes positively to the appropriateness of discourse (Tiawati et al., 2024). As a result, an appropriate teaching method is required to assist EFL university students in learning about culture and its relevance to language.

Teaching a CCU course is perceived as challenging by some educators due to the complexity of the cultural terms and the appropriate instructional approach (Ratnasari, 2018). It is also believed that some challenges arose due to limited exposure to authentic contexts, limited cultural awareness, and the need for an inclusive classroom atmosphere (Oberste-Berghaus, 2024; Ratnasari, 2019). Nevertheless, according to Syam & Susanti (2024), through innovative teaching strategies, tools, and strong support from educators, students experience a positive impact on their linguistic competencies despite some challenges. This aligns with research findings that underscore the role of learning tools and instruction in an EFL classroom in enhancing students'

reading comprehension and language acquisition (Burhanuddin et al., 2025; Razavi & Gilakjani, 2020). Therefore, the integration of learning tools is essential to enhance the effectiveness of classroom instruction.

Digital reflective journals have been considered an effective pedagogical tool in teaching and learning that assist learners in higher education contexts in promoting critical and reflective thinking (Apgar, 2024; Wallengren-Lynch et al., 2024). The use of reflective journals helps EFL learners understand and apply the concepts they learn during the course and encourages them to be active participants in their learning and to express their own thoughts (Wallengren-Lynch, 2024). According to Apgar (2024), reflective journals positively impact students' attitudes and experiences in the learning process, and incorporating this pedagogical tool as a component in a course can enhance engagement and understanding among students in the class. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that the use of reflective journals inside classrooms promotes improved learning experiences, self-awareness, and critical thinking skills (Apgar, 2024; Wallengren-Lynch, 2024).

Research on reflective journals has largely focused on English language skills such as writing and speaking skills (Aliyu et al., 2023; Balbay, 2021; Ramadhanti, 2024; Sudirman et al., 2024). It is stated that implementing reflective journals promotes EFL learners' motivation, engagement, freedom of expression, and metacognitive awareness in the instructional process of speaking and writing skills (Aliyu et al., 2023; Balbay, 2021; Ramadhanti, 2024; Sudirman et al., 2024). However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, there is limited research on the impact of a digital reflective journal on students' motivation and their related perceptions among EFL university learners in CCU courses.

Exploring this area is essential as students' perceptions of reflective journal implementation can influence their motivation and engagement in the classroom. As some studies indicate, positive perceptions may enhance students' motivation and engagement in the classroom, while negative perceptions may impede the teaching and learning process (Lukman et al., 2022; Novak et al., 2023). Furthermore, motivation has been identified as a significant factor in language teaching success (Ni & Xu, 2025). Students with higher motivation typically demonstrate positive attitudes, actively participate in the learning process, and perform best in class, whereas those with low motivation tend to have lower academic achievement, concentration, and engagement.

In light of these considerations, the current study seeks to address the gap on how the use of digital reflective journals influence students' motivation in CCU courses. This research aims to shed light on how reflective journals enhance students' motivation and engagement, and to contribute, both theoretically and practically, to the development of EFL students' motivation in university settings. Accordingly, the research question guiding this study is: "What is the effect of using a digital reflective journal on student motivation in learning a CCU course?"

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning motivation

Motivation is a salient factor in second-language learning that affects students' persistence and success in attaining second-language proficiency (Seshagiri & Krishna, 2019). A study conducted by Aung and Nikolov (2025) confirmed that motivation significantly influences students' engagement and the learning outcomes in English foreign language classes. Furthermore, focusing on second language grit and foreign language enjoyment, Jin (2024) found that there was a relationship between learning motivation and classroom engagement, which indicates that the learners who encountered a higher degree of enjoyment in the English classroom were more likely to actively participate, engage emotionally, and perform well in doing the given task.

As defined by Deci and Ryan (2020), Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a general framework for understanding human motivation, well-being, and self-development. It suggested that people possessed a natural predisposition in their psychological development; however, it relied on the satisfaction of primary psychological needs in the social environment. Deci and Ryan (2020) classified the three basic psychological needs as autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy is defined as students' experience and feeling that their behavior and actions are triggered by their own personal choice, aligning with their interest in finishing the tasks. Meanwhile, competence means that students have the ability and skills to perform classroom activities. Furthermore, students' relatedness is linked with their relationship with their lecturer and teachers in the EFL classroom. Jin (2024) stated that emotional resources and motivation empower learners and lead them to be actively involved in the educational context.

Reflective journals

Reflective journals have been extensively employed as a teaching tool to enhance students' ability in writing skills. As stated by Alt et al. (2022), a reflective journal is an effective learning method that fosters students' higher-order reasoning, and it is also recognized as a learning journal, diary, or response log. It has been found to be an effective strategy for enhancing students' writing skills (Fathia Baresh, 2022; Pham et al., 2022; Ramadhanti & Yanda, 2024). Through a reflective journal, students could evaluate, discover, and share their perspectives on their learning experiences, activities, and recent findings in the teaching and learning process (Farrah, 2012; Lindroth, 2015). The reflective journal, also known as journal keeping, may enhance students' critical thinking and cognitive skills by allowing them to make decisions based on data from diverse contexts and experiences in learning instruction (Aliyu et al., 2023; Lindroth, 2015).

Initiated by Moon (2004), reflective journals consisted of 5 main steps: description of the experience, reflection of feelings, analysis and interpretation, evaluation, and a learning & action plan. These stages guide learners in writing their reflective journals related to what they studied during the CCU course. It allows students to express their description (what happened in the classroom), interpretation (what they learnt), their own feelings, and actions for the upcoming meeting. Research conducted by Dea Silvani et al. (2024) confirmed that students perceived a digital reflective journal positively as it fostered university students' self-awareness, critical

thinking, and problem-solving skills while studying certain topics. Furthermore, Ramadhanti and Yanda (2021) found that reflective journals enhance students' motivation and self-confidence in explanatory text writing by allowing them to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas as they complete the assigned writing task.

Another study conducted by Dzulkoidah et al. (2025) investigated the experience of an Indonesian learner who studied abroad in Pakistan through narrative inquiry. The researchers underscored that students' study abroad experiences significantly contribute to the development of personal and intercultural competence in order to achieve a deeper cultural understanding through reflective journals. Although the previous study emphasized the use of reflective journals in developing CCU in the context of study abroad, there remains a gap in understanding the effects of digital reflective journals on EFL learners' motivation in CCU courses.

RESEARCH METHOD

The nature of the study

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach. As stated by Creswell (2014), a qualitative study aims to seek rich, detailed, and comprehensive explanations and information from participants regarding the research phenomenon, without testing a hypothesis or manipulating variables. Within this framework, the descriptive model was employed to provide a comprehensive overview of participants' experiences with reflective journals in everyday terms (Sandelowski, 2000). This design is appropriate for the present study because motivation and student perceptions are complex and subjective phenomena that cannot be fully captured by quantitative measures. As the present study sought to understand the influence of a digital reflective journal on learners' motivation over the course of one semester, this approach enabled an in-depth exploration of learners' experiences and voices while also examining the learning tool's role in shaping their motivation and classroom engagement.

The participants of the study

The participants of this study were 6 Students from English Language Education Study program, Universitas Negeri Makassar, who had registered for the CCU course during one semester. A purposive sampling technique was used to select three students from class E and three from class F, each identified at the beginning of the CCU course as having one of three affective states: fear, neutrality, or excitement. This sampling strategy is commonly implemented to maximize variation within the data (Palinkas et al., 2015). By including participants with a range of initial affective states, the study aimed to capture a broader spectrum of experiences and motivations. This strategy also facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of the influence of the digital reflective journal on learners and enhanced the credibility and depth of the qualitative findings.

Data Collection Instrument

The sole instrument used to collect the data was semi-structured interviews. The interview was adapted from Deci and Ryan (2020). As suggested by Creswell (2013), semi-structured

interviews allow researchers to maintain flexibility in using predetermined questions to elicit in-depth responses from the participants. Hence, the collected data was rich and detailed, and, more importantly, the subjects' voices were accurately depicted. Furthermore, the researchers could clarify the emerging issues raised by the participants, which aligned well with the qualitative study's research objective. Each interview lasted about 20 to 30 minutes and was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, the participants' native language, to ensure participants could express their perceptions without linguistic barriers. All sessions were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, the researcher adopted the thematic analysis approach outlined by Mwita and Mwilongo (2025). The process began by familiarizing oneself with the collected data, during which participants' responses were carefully recorded and identified. The next step was creating initial codes, where the statements regarding self-determination theory were coded manually. Following this step was searching for themes from the codes, which were categorized into 3 elements of SDT (autonomy, competence, and relatedness). The fourth step was reviewing the obtained themes, which ensured the data were accurate and aligned with the research focus. The fifth step was defining the theme, which provided the meaning for themes consistent with the collected data, code, and sub-themes. The sixth stage was the identification of the most significant quotations, which clearly defined the participants' experience and motivation. The last step was writing up, during which the researchers synthesized and organized the data into the findings section, supported by excerpts from the participants.

FINDING

This section presents the study's findings in response to the research questions. The data were gathered from six EFL learners enrolled in the CCU course during the first semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. The data were collected through a semi-structured interview adapted from Deci and Ryan (2020). The description of the emerging theme will be elaborated in the following section.

Theme 1: EFL learners' overall feelings and experiences using a digital reflective journal

This theme depicts EFL learners' feelings and experiences as they used digital reflective journals in CCU courses over one semester. It reveals a gradual shift in emotion from initial anxiety and uncertainty to progressive adjustment, leading students to perceive digital reflective journals as a pedagogical tool that supports meaningful learning in the CCU course.

Initial anxiety and uncertainty

At the beginning of the course, some learners felt mild anxiety and confusion related to the process of writing reflective journals. This emotional state appeared due to their unfamiliarity with the tools, their first exposure to the course, and limited lexical resources, although other participants commented that they were excited at the start since they enjoyed the learning process.

As student 1 (S1) commented, *“At first it was a bit difficult to determine the right words, mam.”* Another student (S2) stated, *“I’m a bit worried because it’s a new lesson for me; I’ve never heard of reflective journals, and I haven’t really heard of CCU.”* Meanwhile, student 5 (S5) argued, *“For me, I’m a bit curious or excited, ma’am, because I also want to find out what the meaning of and the relationship between CCU and culture”*. These participants’ responses show that the students were initially anxious about learning CCU courses employing a digital reflective journal.

Progressive adjustment

As the class ran, learners became more familiar with the reflective journal's writing process. As this was a weekly, mandatory assignment, most students reported feeling confident and comfortable writing their own thoughts and experiences. Student 5 (S5) commented that *“Over time, I also got more used to it and more comfortable writing reflective journals”*. Another student (S3) stated that *“my feelings changed, I was happy because the lecturer's instructions were also clear”*. Furthermore, student 4 added, *“I became more accustomed to writing reflections more critically and in a more structured way”*. This finding depicts that student experienced a shift of emotion from anxiety to excitement, and they generally adapted and accepted the reflective journals as a mandatory task in CCU courses.

Meaningful learning reflection

At the end of the course, all respondents perceived digital reflective journals as a pedagogical tool and as a meaningful means of reflection. Learners reported that such a tool helped them consolidate their learning, facilitate reflection on the content, and review the lesson. As student 3 (S3) commented, *“It seems reflective journals force me to remember the material I’ve studied.”* Student 4 (S4) reported that *“I think reflective journals are very helpful not only in learning but also in reflecting on what I have learned”*. Furthermore, student 6 argued, *“If I have to review the lesson material, I just need to open my reflective journal because all things are arranged there from the first to the last meeting”*. Overall, digital reflective journals provide an advantageous impact on EFL learners in learning, reflecting, and reviewing the CCU courses.

Theme 2: Learners’ autonomy development

This theme explains the development of students’ autonomy in CCU courses through the use of digital reflective journals. The results reveal that EFL learners have opportunities to express their own voices, develop a sense of learning ownership, and demonstrate self-regulated learning processes.

Freedom to express personal voice

Digital reflective journals enabled learners to convey their personal thoughts, arguments, and feelings about the CCU learning process. Some respondents emphasized that such a tool provided a medium for them to write their responses honestly without fear of making mistakes. One student stated, *“Yes, ma’am, writing a reflective journal helps to reveal what we feel during the learning process”* (S3). Another student commented, *“It’s quite helpful because through reflective journals*

I can express my feelings and understanding during the learning process without worrying about right and wrong answers” (S5). Participants' responses highlight that digital reflective journals serve as a platform for students to express their personal views.

Developing a sense of ownership and self-regulated learning

Journaling through a digital platform encourages learners to feel responsible and take control of their own learning. Students always consider their progress and make any further decisions on how to improve their learning process. In addition to monitoring their learning, they are responsible for addressing their own weaknesses. Hence, learners are more aware of their areas of development and learning behavior. As stated by a student, *“I feel more responsible because I pay more attention to the material and I can also try to understand it, not just attending class” (S5).* Another student (S4) opined that *“by writing reflective journals I can know what I have learned, what I don't understand, and what I need to improve and learn more deeply”.* This finding indicates that digital reflective journals facilitated EFL learners in controlling their learning behaviors and reflected a sense of ownership in CCU courses.

Theme 3: The development of competence and confidence

This theme highlights the use of digital reflective journals to enhance students' competence and confidence in CCU courses. It indicates the use of such a tool in the learning process to support learners in understanding the course content, to increase students' awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, and to enhance their confidence in the teaching and learning process.

Improving students' understanding of the course content

The learners reported that digital reflective journals helped them understand the materials well, as they could review and revisit the materials they had studied in the classroom. Using such a tool in learning becomes a medium to align their own experiences with the materials discussed during the course. One student (S3) explained *“reflective journal helped me to understand the material because I need to write and review what I've learnt in the class”*, while student 6 commented *“reflective journal helps me to learn and remember the material I've studied, it makes it easier to read it again because it has been made in the form of folders”.* Furthermore, S5 stated, *“For me, reflective journals help because not only do I understand the material, but I can also relate it to experiences and events that I have experienced myself”.* This finding emphasized that digital reflective journals helped students gain a deeper understanding of the materials in CCU courses.

Recognizing students' strengths and weaknesses in learning

The use of digital reflective journals in CCU courses enabled students to become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Several respondents discussed how such a tool helped them evaluate their progress in the learning process and identify the specific constraints they encountered in class. As one student (S4) commented, *“By writing, I know what my strengths and weaknesses are, and I maintain the good things from my learning”.* Another participant (S2),

“With a reflective journal, I can mark a bit of difficult material for me to understand, so in the future I have to pay more attention to this material”. This result proposes that digital reflective journals supported students’ self-awareness in CCU courses.

Enhancing students’ self-confidence

Using digital reflective journals in CCU courses enhanced students’ self-confidence during the teaching and learning process. As learners gained a positive impact from the tool, such as the ease of recalling materials and recognizing their learning improvements, they expressed greater confidence and prepared for the upcoming meeting. One student (S3) mentioned, *“It’s quite helpful, because I’m ready to study other materials in this course”*. Another participant (S6) stated, *“My self-confidence increases because if I had the exam, I just need to read a reflective journal before the final exam”*. Overall, learners perceive digital reflective journals as a learning process that contributed to the growth of self-confidence in CCU courses.

Theme 4: Sense of relatedness and support from educators

This theme highlights students’ perceptions of relatedness and support gained from educators through the use of digital reflective journals in CCU courses. It indicates that, by using the tool as part of the learning process, students feel their voices are recognized and understood by educators, which fosters a strong relationship between students and educators. Such a situation encouraged both emotional and academic support during the teaching process.

A sense of being heard and understood

Learners stated that their thoughts and learning experiences in CCU courses are acknowledged by educators. Several students commented that educators read their own reflective journals that made them feel valued and appreciated. As commented by a student (S4), *“Maybe yes, because my lecturer indirectly reads my opinions and feelings poured out on reflective journals, and I believe there’s a connection, ma’am”*. Other students argued, *“through reflective journals, perhaps as a lecturer, you can understand my way of thinking, and according to my own understanding”*. These comments highlight that reflective journals can serve as a medium for students and lecturers to communicate ideas.

Strengthening the relationship between students and teachers

Reflective journals strengthened the relationship between students and educators in a positive way. The students explained their sense of comfort through their interactions with educators, as a result of expressing their own thoughts in reflective journals. As one student (S1) noted, *“My lecturer understands me, she pays attention to me because if there’s something I don’t know, I can directly ask my lecturer”*. Another respondent, student 2, opined, *“I am asked questions about our feelings during learning and discussions, so I knew that the lecturer understood my feelings during the discussion”*. Furthermore, student 5 commented, *“For me, I feel more cared for and understood by the lecturer because I can express my own feelings and opinions through diaries”*. This result emphasized that reflective journals enhanced interpersonal

engagement among learners and lecturers. From the perspective of SDT, the recognition and support provided by lecturers can be considered a form of extrinsic motivation. When the lecturers read, acknowledged, and responded to the reflective journal entries, the students felt heard and validated, and thus were encouraged to engage more deeply with the learning process. Taking into account the students' experience, it can be concluded that the learners' role in the CCU course extended beyond that of a sole facilitator; they also served as a significant source of extrinsic motivation. Through their well-established relationship with students facilitated by reflective journals through the semester, the lecturers reinforce students' commitment and participation in the classroom.

Theme 5: Influence on Students' Motivation and Engagement

This theme explains the impact of digital reflective journals on students' motivation and engagement in CCU courses. The findings show that such activity generally enhances learners' interest in teaching processes, triggers positive emotional responses, and encourages active engagement during class.

Enhancing students' intrinsic motivation

This result revealed that using digital reflective journals in CCU courses encouraged learners to better understand the course content. The tool helped students become more interested and willing to explore the materials deeply during the learning process, as the value of learning activities in the courses was recognized through reflection in digital diaries. One student (S6) stated, *"I am very enthusiastic about writing reflective journals because if I forget something, I just go back and read it again"*. Student 2 mentioned, *"CCU is my favorite subject, and I am always curious about the upcoming topics to discuss in the class and write in my own reflective journals"*. Furthermore, another student expressed, *"I can see my progress during the learning process through reflective journals, even though it's a small progress, but I'm more motivated to learn. The tool motivates me to study more"*. The above responses emphasized that the employment of digital reflective journals in CCU courses enhanced students' intrinsic motivation in learning.

Reflection as a motivational strategy in learning

Digital reflective journals serve as a medium that motivates students to take further action and engage more seriously with the learning process in the classroom. In the reflective journal prompt, students are encouraged to evaluate their progress in the class and make plans for the next meeting, leading them to adjust their learning strategies. One student (S1) stated, *"In a reflective journal, there's a future plan, so I always write my plan there and the way I improve for the next meeting"*. Another participant (S5) mentioned, *"I really enjoy working on reflective journals, even late at night. I think this assignment relates to grammar and paragraph writing, which are sometimes absent in class. Having reflective journals allows me to practice writing assignments more"*.

Furthermore, this tool can be applied in other subjects due to its impact on helping students understand the course content, review the lesson, and prepare for mid-term and final exams. As argued by one student (S4), *"I thank you for this assignment, I can review the lesson on my own, the material is easier to understand, and I'll be more ready if there are midterm and final exams in the future"*. Another student (S3) mentioned that, *"it's very necessary, because we can find out what has been understood, what has not been understood, and what needs to be improved with the previous material through reflective journals"*. Overall, reflective journals are not only a space for reflection but also a resource for learning, particularly for preparing for future tests.

DISCUSSION

This section presents interpretations of the research findings from the participants' viewpoints. The objective of this study was to explore the impact of digital reflective journals implementation on students' motivation in CCU courses. As reflected in the findings, the selected EFL university students experienced a positive impact on motivation through the use of digital reflective journals in the teaching and learning process. The learners' overall feelings and experiences shifted from an early sign of anxiety to the stage of adjustment, which culminated in a positive perception of reflective journals as a meaningful pedagogical tool in learning processes. It indicates a dynamic process of learning, where learners experienced this emotion due to a lack of knowledge, limited exposure to the courses, and unfamiliarity with the tool. However, they gradually accepted the process, enhanced their own abilities, showed excitement about writing reflections through sustained exercises, and sensed a positive, supportive language-learning environment. These results are observed from the lens of SDT theory by Deci and Ryan (2020).

Regarding the overall feelings, the findings in this research are in line with a previous empirical study by Jarvis and Baloyi (2020), demonstrating that reflective journaling assisted nursing undergraduate learners possessed a learning development from an initial phase of uncertainty to become more independent critical thinkers who were able to utilize higher-order thinking skills (HOTS). Moreover, Ryan and Ryan (2013) revealed that learning reflection was not about unconscious skill for learners, but it is a pedagogic area, which requires strategic, explicit intervention and support in the courses. Meanwhile, previous research revealed that beyond an EFL classroom setting, writing a journal served as a pedagogical aid in enhancing students' attitude and reducing their anxiety in the classroom (Mogesse et al., 2025). Thus, it can be indicated that digital reflective journals served as a beneficial scaffolding tool for learning, helping students adapt well and reducing their anxiety in new academic settings.

The second emerging theme identified from the findings is the development of students' autonomy in CCU courses. It was observed that the use of digital reflective journals provided valuable opportunities for students to express their own voices (personal thoughts, arguments, and feelings) in the learning process without fear of making mistakes. Furthermore, students develop self-regulated learning skills as they monitor, plan, and evaluate their learning progress through the use of digital reflective journals. As Chinpakdee (2022) noted, guided learning through journals enhanced students' metacognitive awareness and self-directed learning, fostering their autonomy

in learning. The findings of the current research are also aligned with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), proposed by Deci and Ryan (2020), who posited that students' autonomy refers to their ability to take responsibility and engage in self-initiated learning from planning to evaluation. Hence, it can be inferred that students' autonomy can be achieved not only through instructional processes but also through an organized reflective practice embedded in a lecture series.

Moving on to learning development competence, the current findings revealed that digital reflective journals supported students' understanding of the materials and their awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, leading them to enhance self-confidence in CCU courses. The previous study by Alt et al. (2022) found that reflective journals helped learners internalize course content, connecting it to the theory and background knowledge they acquired during the instructional process. Moreover, another study confirmed that students' self-reflection, awareness, and their academic performance can be enhanced through the employment of reflective journals (Dea Silvani et al., 2024; Sudirman et al., 2024). Through the lens of SDT theory proposed by Deci and Ryan (2020), competence, as one component of psychological needs, refers to the ability to master new skills and tackle challenges to achieve goals. Hence, the mentioned tool functions as a cognitive reflective tool, enabling learners to gain a better understanding, develop self-awareness, and build self-confidence in a learning context.

In terms of relatedness and support from educators, the results showed that digital reflective journals strengthened a crucial bond between lecturers and learners in educational environments. The learners were heard, understood, and supported through reflective journals, which served as a medium for communicating with the instructors and for gaining meaningful feedback and compliments from the educators. This resonated with SDT theory by Deci and Ryan (2020), emphasizing the concept of relatedness as a meaningful interpersonal relationship (feeling connected, cared for, and belonging to the environment) in sustaining motivation in learning processes. Empirical evidence further indicated that journaling in the classroom enhanced students' proficiency and emotional well-being, fostering a positive student–teacher relationship and trust (Chan & Aubrey, 2024; Villarama et al., 2025). Accordingly, digital reflective journals can be utilized in tertiary educational settings as a medium to enhance cognitive reflection and nurture interpersonal relationships between students and lecturers.

Another important finding from an emerging theme was that digital reflective journals generally enhanced students' intrinsic motivation and engagement in teaching and learning. Observed from students' responses that they demonstrated a high level of enjoyment in learning CCU courses due to the implementation of digital reflective journals, and such courses were their favorite subject of all subjects administered during the first semester. This finding echoed with previous studies suggesting that incorporating such a tool not only successfully improved the growth of metacognitive skills throughout writing assignment (Ramadhanti et al., 2020), but also enhanced students' motivation and engagement in learning writing since writing practices became an enjoyable and motivating activities leading students to experience deep learning (Ni'ma et al., 2019; Ramadhanti & Yanda, 2024). Another study by Zhai et al. (2023) emphasized that reflection

practices fostered students' motivation, helping them experience deep learning beyond learning outcomes. Thus, digital reflective journals may have become a key driver of motivation and engagement, enabling students to internalize their learning experience through self-monitoring, adaptive strategies, and prospective plans.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the voices of EFL university learners through the employment of digital reflective journals. The focus of this research was to explore and understand the influence of digital reflective journals on EFL university students' motivation in CCU courses through the lens of self-determination theory, encompassing autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The data were collected utilizing a semi-structured interview adapted from Deci and Ryan (2020). The results indicated that digital reflective journals served as a positive pedagogical tool, fostering students' motivation to learn CCU courses and supporting learners' experiences beyond mere understanding of the course materials. Such an effective instructional tool successfully shifted students' emotional state from anxiety and uncertainty to greater adaptability, leading them to experience meaningful engagement through ongoing, regular practices.

Utilizing digital reflective journals potentially served as a medium to express students' voices, to encourage students to become autonomous learners, and to monitor their academic progress for the whole meeting. Furthermore, they supported students' awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, helping them foster self-confidence. More importantly, such a beneficial learning tool also strengthened students' rapport with educators, enabling students to be heard, understood, and supported by the instructors in the learning process. Overall, the study emphasized that digital reflective journals played a pivotal role in enhancing students' motivation and engagement in higher education settings, beyond serving as a medium to develop cognitive reflective skills in CCU courses.

The present study offers useful insights into how digital reflective journals work in a CCU setting, but there are some limitations to note. The sample size was small, with only six participants, which allowed for a deeper qualitative look but made it challenging to apply the findings in a wider context. Future researchers might consider adopting a larger, more varied approach to improve the generalizability of the results to other groups. Future studies should also examine how students' basic psychological needs, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness, manifest beyond CCU courses. Longitudinal research is highly encouraged to explore how students' long-term motivation and engagement are affected by the evolution of digital reflective journals in learning processes.

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