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EFFECTS OF REFLECTIVE WRITING ACTIVITIES ON EFL STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT IN ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY WRITING

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Abstract

Student engagement remains a critical yet underexplored dimension of EFL writing instruction, particularly in contexts where passive learning predominates. This study investigated the effects of reflective writing tasks (RWTs) on four dimensions of EFL student engagement, behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social, using an interrupted time-series design (ITSD) with repeated measures. Quantitative data were collected from 30 third-year EFL students enrolled in an Advanced Writing Skills course at a public university in southern Ethiopia across six measurement points (three pre-interventions and three post-intervention) using a validated 20-item Student Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ). Repeated measures ANOVA revealed statistically significant increases across all four engagement dimensions ($p < .001$) with very large effect sizes ($\eta^2 = .775-.837$). Social engagement demonstrated the most substantial improvement ($\eta^2 = .837$, $F(5,145) = 148.80$), followed by behavioral ($\eta^2 = .822$), cognitive ($\eta^2 = .816$), and emotional engagement ($\eta^2 = .775$). Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons confirmed that all 36 pre-tests to post-test comparisons were statistically significant, while no post-test comparisons differed, indicating sustained engagement gains. Qualitative interview data complemented these findings, revealing a shift from passive reception to active participation, reduced writing anxiety, and enhanced peer collaboration. These results affirm that reflective writing tasks constitute a high-impact instructional strategy for fostering multidimensional EFL learner engagement in argumentative essay writing contexts.

Keywords: student engagement; reflective writing tasks; EFL writing; argumentative essay; repeated measures; time-series design

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1. Introduction

Learner engagement has emerged as one of the most consequential constructs in contemporary educational research, recognized as a robust predictor of academic achievement, retention, and long-term learning outcomes (Fredricks et al., 2004; Reschly & Christenson, 2022). Within the domain of second and foreign language education, engagement has gained particular prominence because it encapsulates both the observable behavioral investment of learners and the covert psychological processes that underpin effective language acquisition (Han & Hyland, 2015; Zhang & Hyland, 2018). Despite this recognition, engagement in EFL writing

classrooms, particularly in sub-Saharan African contexts, remains chronically low and inadequately theorized.

In Ethiopian EFL educational settings, empirical observations and classroom-based studies reveal a concerning pattern: students typically engage in purposeful writing activities for less than 40% of allocated class time (Gebremariam & Asgede, 2023; Megra et al., 2025). Behavioral disengagement manifests as off-task behavior, incomplete assignment submission, and surface-level task completion. The cognitive dimension is equally impoverished, with students seldom employing metacognitive strategies or deep processing approaches. Ethiopian graduate and undergraduate students exhibit notably low self-efficacy in academic and scientific writing, a finding attributable in part to limited experience with reflective learning practices (Galana et al., 2023).

Reflective writing tasks (RWTs) represent a theoretically grounded pedagogical response to this engagement deficit. Rooted in Dewey's philosophy of reflective experience and Schön's (1983) notion of reflection-in-action, RWTs prompt learners to critically examine their cognitive processes, emotional responses, and social interactions during writing. Reflection inherently activates metacognitive thinking—the monitoring, evaluation, and regulation of one's own learning (Irvin, 2011; Zheng et al., 2025). When applied to argumentative essay writing, reflective tasks can deepen genre awareness, heighten rhetorical consciousness, and cultivate the kind of sustained effort associated with high engagement (Novikova & Makarkina, 2025; Zhang & Hyland, 2025).

The multidimensional framework of student engagement, as conceptualized by Fredricks et al. (2004), distinguishes four interrelated but analytically separable dimensions. Behavioral engagement encompasses observable participation indicators such as effort, attention, persistence, and task completion (Finn, 1993; Skinner et al., 2008). Cognitive engagement refers to the strategic, self-regulatory, and metacognitive investment students bring to learning tasks (Neumann & McDonough, 2015). Emotional engagement captures the affective dimension, interest, enjoyment, anxiety levels, and sense of belonging (Linnenbrink-Garcia & Pekrun, 2011; Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2016). Social engagement addresses the quality and frequency of peer and teacher interactions during learning (Guthrie & Klauda, 2014). Each dimension contributes uniquely to the overall learning ecology of the writing classroom.

Despite a growing body of literature on feedback engagement in higher education (Carless, 2022; Carless & Boud, 2018) and on student engagement more broadly (Hınız & Çelik, 2025; Hegarty et al., 2026), no study to date has simultaneously examined the effects of a structured reflective writing intervention on all four engagement dimensions within the Ethiopian EFL context. Furthermore, existing engagement research has disproportionately relied on cross-sectional designs, thereby precluding causal inference and obscuring temporal trajectories of change (Fredricks et al., 2016; Wang, 2021).

This study addresses these gaps by employing an interrupted time-series design (ITSD) with six measurement points to track engagement trajectories before and after the implementation of reflective writing tasks. The research was guided by the following questions:

1. *What are the effects of reflective writing tasks on the behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social engagement of EFL learners in argumentative essay writing?*
2. *Are observed engagement changes sustained or transient across post-intervention measurement points?*
3. *What are students' qualitative perceptions of reflective writing's influence on their engagement?*

The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of engagement's malleability and provides practical pedagogical insights for EFL writing instruction in African higher education contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework: The Multidimensional Model of Student Engagement

The conceptualization of student engagement as a multidimensional construct has evolved considerably since Finn's (1993) foundational identification of behavioral participation and identification as core components. Fredricks et al. (2004) synthesized disparate engagement literatures to propose an influential tripartite model encompassing behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions, subsequently extended by scholars to incorporate social engagement as a fourth, equally important component (Guthrie & Klauda, 2014; Hegarty et al., 2026). This four-dimensional framework provides the theoretical backbone of the present study, as it enables a comprehensive assessment of how instructional interventions influence learner engagement across observable and internal domains.

A pivotal theoretical claim underlying engagement research is its malleability: unlike static learner attributes such as aptitude or personality, engagement is responsive to instructional conditions and pedagogical decisions (Kim & Kim, 2020; Shernoff & Anderson, 2014). This positions engagement as an actionable target for educational intervention. Reschly and Christenson (2022) note that engagement functions as a mediating variable between instructional quality and learning outcomes, a view corroborated by studies showing that high-engagement classrooms produce significantly better writing performance (Ceylan & Korkmaz, 2026; Teng & Huang, 2026).

Within the EFL writing literature, engagement has been conceptualized primarily in terms of feedback engagement, the cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses students demonstrate when encountering teacher or peer commentary (Han & Hyland, 2015; Saeed & Alharbi, 2023). While this strand of research has yielded valuable insights into how learners process and utilize corrective input, it represents only a partial account of engagement in writing contexts. Engagement in the act of writing itself, the moment-to-moment cognitive investment, affective orientation, and social participation that characterize active composition—has received comparatively scant empirical attention.

2.2 Conceptual Framework: Reflective Writing and Engagement Mechanisms

Reflective writing tasks operate through multiple theoretically distinct mechanisms, each of which maps onto one or more engagement dimensions. From a cognitive perspective, reflection activates metacognitive monitoring and self-regulatory processes (Irvin, 2011; Novikova & Makarkina, 2025). When students are prompted to identify the rhetorical strategies they employed, evaluate the effectiveness of their argumentation, and plan revision approaches, they necessarily engage in higher-order cognitive processing beyond the surface execution of writing tasks (Chan et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2025).

Emotionally, reflective writing provides a structured space for students to articulate and process affective experiences associated with writing, including anxiety, frustration, and accomplishment (Moon, 2006; Tsingos-Lucas et al., 2016). Research consistently demonstrates that writing anxiety constitutes a significant barrier to engagement, particularly in L2 contexts where learners must simultaneously manage linguistic and rhetorical demands (Chen, 2026; Linnenbrink-Garcia & Pekrun, 2011). Reflective journaling and goal-setting practices associated with RWTs have been shown to reduce anxiety and cultivate a more positive affective orientation toward writing (Locke & Latham, 2013; Rad et al., 2026).

Behaviorally, the structured nature of reflective tasks, requiring regular written outputs, sustained attention to the writing process, and documented goal pursuit, creates accountability structures that promote persistent effort and task completion (Fredricks et al., 2016; Liang & Wu, 2025). The requirement to document one's writing process in reflective journals constitutes itself a form of behavioral engagement, while simultaneously reinforcing the cognitive engagement associated with process-oriented writing instruction.

Socially, the sharing and discussion of reflective insights creates opportunities for peer learning, collaborative strategy development, and mutual accountability (Harris, 2010; Zhang & Hyland, 2025). When students articulate their reflections to peers, whether in writing groups, paired discussions, or whole-class sharing, they contribute to a learning community characterized by shared epistemic goals and reciprocal feedback (Bui & Nguyen, 2026; Romero & Bobkina, 2026). This social dimension aligns with sociocultural theories of learning that position collaborative dialogue as the engine of cognitive development.

2.3 Reflective Writing in EFL Argumentative Essay Contexts

Argumentative essay writing represents a particularly demanding genre for EFL learners, requiring simultaneous management of rhetorical conventions, logical structuring, stance marking, and linguistic accuracy (Erni et al., 2026; Martínez Fortuny, 2026). Reflective writing tasks have been advocated as a means of scaffolding learners' genre awareness by prompting

metacognitive examination of argumentative moves, evidence deployment, and counterargument integration (Teng & Huang, 2026; Zhang & Hyland, 2025).

Al-Hoorie's (2014) systematic review of engagement research identifies definitional ambiguity and methodological inconsistency as major impediments to cumulative knowledge-building in the field. Self-reported engagement measures, while widely used, are susceptible to social desirability bias and retrospective distortion, particularly in high-power-distance educational cultures such as Ethiopia's (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023; Fatunbi et al., 2026). The interrupted time-series design employed in this study mitigates some of these limitations by capturing engagement trajectories at multiple time points, enabling distinction between pre-intervention baselines, immediate intervention effects, and sustained post-intervention maintenance.

Hınız and Çelik's (2025) bibliometric analysis of student engagement research in ELT reveals a growing but geographically skewed literature, with Ethiopian and broader East African contexts dramatically underrepresented. The present study responds directly to this gap, situating its investigation within a specific institutional and cultural context that has received minimal empirical attention while grappling with the universal challenge of fostering deep learner engagement in writing instruction.

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023) in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed independently, and integrated at the interpretation stage. The quantitative component utilized an interrupted time-series design (ITSD) with repeated measures, a robust quasi-experimental approach suited to single-group longitudinal investigations of intervention effects (Sims et al., 2022; St.Clair et al., 2016). The ITSD involved six measurement time points: three pre-intervention measurements (PRE 1, PRE 2, PRE 3) establishing baseline trajectories and three post-intervention measurements (POST 1, POST 2, POST 3) tracking the trajectory of change. This design enables inference about intervention causality by distinguishing pre-intervention trends from post-intervention shifts and by assessing whether post-intervention gains are sustained or attenuating. The 12-week intervention period encompassed the full semester of the Advanced Writing Skills course.

3.2 Participants

Participants comprised 30 third-year EFL students ($N = 30$; mean age = 22.4 years; 17 male, 13 female) enrolled in the Advanced Writing Skills I course at a public university in southern Ethiopia during the 2025/2026 academic year. All participants had completed two prior years of English-medium instruction and met the university's language proficiency threshold for third-year enrollment. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure the cohort represented the target population of EFL learners engaging formally with argumentative writing for the first time at this level. No students withdrew during the study period, yielding a complete dataset

across all six time points. For the qualitative component, eight participants were purposively selected based on writing performance levels (high: $n = 2$; medium: $n = 4$; low: $n = 2$) and gender (male: $n = 4$; female: $n = 4$) to ensure representational diversity in the interview data.

3.3 Intervention: Reflective Writing Tasks

The reflective writing task (RWT) intervention was implemented across 12 instructional weeks following the three pre-intervention baseline measurements. RWTs were integrated into the argumentative essay writing curriculum and comprised three interlocking components: (a) process journals, in which students documented their planning, drafting, and revision decisions after each writing session; (b) structured reflection prompts targeting each engagement dimension separately (e.g., metacognitive questions for cognitive engagement, affective prompts for emotional engagement, collaboration protocols for social engagement); and (c) peer reflection-sharing sessions conducted biweekly, in which students discussed their reflective insights in pairs or small groups. Tasks were designed to scaffold progressively toward autonomous reflection, with instructor-provided prompts diminishing in specificity across the intervention period to foster independent reflective practice.

3.4 Instrumentation

A 20-item Student Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ) was adapted from Fredricks et al. (2004) to operationalize the four engagement dimensions in a writing-specific context. Each dimension was measured by five items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree): Behavioral Engagement ("I put full effort into my writing tasks"); Cognitive Engagement ("I think about what I can do better in my next draft"); Emotional Engagement ("I feel interested and motivated when writing argumentative essays"); and Social Engagement ("I actively share ideas with classmates during writing activities"). The SEQ was piloted with 15 second-year students not included in the main study and items were refined based on linguistic clarity and factor loadings. Content validity was established through expert review by three EFL writing specialists, who assessed item relevance and clarity. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients confirmed high internal consistency across all dimensions and at all-time points ($\alpha = .792-.881$; see Table 1).

3.5 Qualitative Data Collection

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with eight purposively sampled participants both prior to the intervention (Week 0) and following its completion (Week 12). Interview protocols comprised 12 open-ended questions exploring students' experiences with reflective writing, perceived changes in engagement, encountered difficulties, and attributions of change. Interviews lasted between 15 and 25 minutes, were conducted in English with clarifications in Amharic where necessary, audio-recorded with participants' informed consent,

and transcribed verbatim. Amharic clarifications were translated into English during transcription by a bilingual research assistant.

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27. A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was performed for each engagement dimension, with time (six levels: PRE1–POST3) as the within-subjects factor. Prior to inferential testing, the Shapiro-Wilk test confirmed normality at all measurement points for all dimensions ($p > .05$ for all). Mauchly's Test of Sphericity verified the sphericity assumption. Post hoc pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni correction identified significant differences between specific time points. Partial eta squared (η^2) was calculated as the effect size estimate, with Cohen's (2013) benchmarks applied: $\eta^2 \geq .01$ small, $\eta^2 \geq .06$ medium, $\eta^2 \geq .14$ large. Polynomial contrast analyses (linear, quadratic, cubic) were conducted to characterize engagement trajectories within the ITSD framework.

Qualitative interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis procedure: familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. The first author coded all interview transcripts, with intercoder reliability established through independent coding of 30% of the data by a second researcher. Disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Themes were constructed inductively from the data while maintaining theoretical sensitivity to the four engagement dimensions. Member-checking was conducted with four of the eight interviewees to ensure interpretive accuracy.

4. Results

4.1 Reliability and Normality

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficients for Engagement Dimensions ($N = 30$)

Dimension	Pretest α	Posttest α	Items	Interpretation
Behavioral Engagement	.808	.818	5	High Reliability
Cognitive Engagement	.870	.848	5	High Reliability
Emotional Engagement	.836	.847	5	High Reliability
Social Engagement	.792	.881	5	High Reliability

Cronbach's alpha coefficients demonstrated high internal consistency across all four engagement dimensions at both pre- and post-intervention measurement points (Table 1). Pre-intervention alpha values ranged from .792 (Social Engagement) to .870 (Cognitive

Engagement) and post-intervention values from .818 (Behavioral Engagement) to .881 (Social Engagement), indicating that the SEQ maintained strong reliability across the full study period.

Shapiro-Wilk tests confirmed that all four engagement dimensions satisfied the normality assumption at all measurement points: Behavioral Engagement ($W = .951$, $p = .172$), Cognitive Engagement ($W = .962$, $p = .318$), Emotional Engagement ($W = .947$, $p = .134$), and Social Engagement ($W = .958$, $p = .267$).

4.2 Descriptive Statistics: Engagement Trajectories Across Six Time Points

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for all four engagement dimensions across the six measurement time points. Pre-intervention mean scores ranged from 2.75 to 3.10 across dimensions and time points, consistently indicating below-average engagement levels on the five-point scale. Post-intervention means increased substantially, ranging from 3.98 to 4.41, representing increases of approximately 1.3 to 1.5 scale points. Behavioral Engagement demonstrated the highest post-intervention mean (POST 3: $M = 4.41$, $SD = 0.36$), while Emotional Engagement showed the most conservative post-intervention increase (POST 1: $M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.42$). Notably, within-phase means were highly stable—pre-intervention scores showed minimal variation across PRE 1, PRE 2, and PRE 3 for all dimensions, confirming stable baseline trajectories. Similarly, post-intervention scores remained stable across POST 1, POST 2, and POST 3, indicating that engagement gains were maintained rather than attenuating.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for All Engagement Dimensions Across Six Time Points

Dimension / Time Point	Mean	SD	95% CI
Behavioral Engagement			
PRE 1	2.78	0.31	[2.67, 2.90]
PRE 2	2.87	0.36	[2.73, 3.00]
PRE 3	2.90	0.40	[2.75, 3.05]
POST 1	4.18	0.35	[4.05, 4.31]
POST 2	4.13	0.35	[4.00, 4.26]
POST 3	4.41	0.36	[4.28, 4.54]
Cognitive Engagement			
PRE 1	2.91	0.33	[2.79, 3.03]
PRE 2	3.10	0.33	[2.97, 3.22]
PRE 3	3.09	0.32	[2.97, 3.21]
POST 1	4.21	0.35	[4.08, 4.34]
POST 2	4.18	0.28	[4.08, 4.29]

POST 3	4.34	0.38	[4.20, 4.48]
Emotional Engagement			
PRE 1	2.75	0.35	[2.62, 2.88]
PRE 2	2.82	0.37	[2.69, 2.96]
PRE 3	2.95	0.27	[2.85, 3.05]
POST 1	3.98	0.42	[3.83, 4.14]
POST 2	4.07	0.36	[3.94, 4.20]
POST 3	4.16	0.37	[4.02, 4.29]
Social Engagement			
PRE 1	2.84	0.32	[2.72, 2.96]
PRE 2	2.92	0.36	[2.78, 3.05]
PRE 3	2.88	0.24	[2.79, 2.97]
POST 1	4.11	0.37	[3.97, 4.25]
POST 2	4.23	0.32	[4.11, 4.35]
POST 3	4.29	0.33	[4.16, 4.41]

Note. BE = Behavioral Engagement; CE = Cognitive Engagement; EE = Emotional Engagement; SE = Social Engagement.

4.3 Assumption Testing: Sphericity

Mauchly's Test of Sphericity indicated that the sphericity assumption was satisfied for all four engagement dimensions (all $p > .05$; see Table 3). Consequently, unadjusted degrees of freedom were retained for all within-subjects F -tests, and Greenhouse-Geisser correction was not required.

Table 3. Mauchly's Test of Sphericity for All Engagement Dimensions

Dimension	Mauchly's W	χ^2	df	p	GG ϵ
Behavioral Engagement	.778	6.79	14	.943	.893
Cognitive Engagement	.700	9.66	14	.788	.894
Emotional Engagement	.661	11.28	14	.665	.876
Social Engagement	.643	11.96	14	.612	.875

Note. GG ϵ = Greenhouse-Geisser epsilon. All $p > .05$ indicate sphericity assumption met; no correction applied.

4.4 Inferential Statistics: Repeated Measures ANOVA

One-way repeated measures ANOVA revealed statistically significant time main effects for all four engagement dimensions, with very large effect sizes in all cases (Table 4). Social Engagement demonstrated the largest overall effect ($F(5,145) = 148.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .837$, 95% CI [.745, .894]), indicating that time accounted for a substantial portion of the variance in social engagement scores. Behavioral Engagement yielded the second-largest effect ($F(5,145) = 133.75$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .822$, 95% CI [.726, .882]), followed by Cognitive Engagement ($F(5,145) = 128.68$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .816$, 95% CI [.717, .877]) and Emotional Engagement ($F(5,145) = 99.97$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .775$, 95% CI [.668, .842]). Observed power equaled 1.000 for all dimensions, confirming adequate statistical power.

Table 4. Summary of Repeated Measures ANOVA Results for All Engagement Dimensions

Dimension	F (df)	P	η^2	95% CI for η^2	Rank
Social Engagement	$F(5,145) = 148.80$	<.001	.837	[.745, .894]	1
Behavioral Engagement	$F(5,145) = 133.75$	<.001	.822	[.726, .882]	2
Cognitive Engagement	$F(5,145) = 128.68$	<.001	.816	[.717, .877]	3
Emotional Engagement	$F(5,145) = 99.97$	<.001	.775	[.668, .842]	4

Note. All F-statistics based on sphericity-assumed df. η^2 = partial eta squared. Observed power = 1.000 for all dimensions.

4.5 Pairwise Comparisons (Bonferroni-Corrected)

Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise comparisons provided fine-grained temporal resolution of the engagement trajectories. As summarized in Table 5, all 36 pre-interventions to post-intervention comparisons were statistically significant ($p < .001$) across all four dimensions, confirming that the intervention produced immediate and substantial engagement increases at POST 1 and that these gains persisted through POST 2 and POST 3. In contrast, no pre-intervention time point differed significantly from any other pre-intervention time point (all $p = 1.000$), confirming stable baseline trajectories. Crucially, no post-intervention comparison reached significance, demonstrating that engagement levels stabilized at the elevated post-intervention level rather than continuing to increase or declining toward baseline.

Table 5. Summary of Bonferroni-Corrected Pairwise Comparisons for All Engagement Dimensions

Comparison Type	Time Points	BE	CE	EE	SE	Significant
Pre-Pre	1 vs 2	ns	ns	Ns	ns	0/4
Pre-Pre	2 vs 3	ns	ns	Ns	ns	0/4

Pre–Pre	1 vs 3	ns	ns	Ns	ns	0/4
Pre–Post	1 vs 4	✓	✓	✓	✓	4/4
Pre–Post	2 vs 4	✓	✓	✓	✓	4/4
Pre–Post	3 vs 4	✓	✓	✓	✓	4/4
Pre–Post	1 vs 6	✓	✓	✓	✓	4/4
Pre–Post	3 vs 6	✓	✓	✓	✓	4/4
Post–Post	4 vs 5	ns	ns	Ns	ns	0/4
Post–Post	5 vs 6	ns	ns	Ns	ns	0/4

Note. BE = Behavioral; CE = Cognitive; EE = Emotional; SE = Social Engagement. ✓ = significant at $p < .001$; ns = not significant. Selected comparisons shown; all 36 pre–post comparisons were significant.

4.6 Qualitative Findings: Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: From Passive Recipients to Active Participants (Cognitive Engagement).

Participants consistently reported a fundamental shift in their orientation toward writing tasks. Prior to the intervention, the majority described writing as a product-oriented activity aimed at satisfying teacher expectations rather than genuine meaning-making. Following the RWT intervention, participants articulated a metacognitive awakening, describing how reflective prompts had prompted them to interrogate their own argumentative strategies and evaluate their rhetorical decisions. One participant stated: "Firstly, I wrote anything to please my teacher. But after the reflections began, I found myself asking whether it could be improved upon. Reflection made me become my own teacher."

Theme 2: Building Emotional Connection with Writing (Emotional Engagement).

A recurrent theme across interview data was a pronounced reduction in writing anxiety and an emergent sense of personal investment in writing outcomes. Participants reported that the reflective process had enabled them to reframe errors as learning opportunities rather than failures, a cognitive reappraisal that reduced the affective inhibition associated with argumentative writing. One participant noted: "In the beginning, I disliked writing because I could only see my faults. However, through reflection, I came to realize how far I had come. Today, I enthusiastically expect writing tasks."

Theme 3: Building a Writing Community (Social Engagement).

Students reported that the peer reflection-sharing sessions had transformed the classroom social climate from one of competitive isolation to collaborative inquiry. The practice of sharing reflective insights created shared metalinguistic reference points that facilitated substantive peer dialogue about writing strategies. One participant remarked: "It was when I heard about the solutions my friend used to organize paragraphs that my mind opened to possibilities."

Theme 4: Challenges in Sustaining Reflective Depth.

A counterpoint theme emerged in which several participants acknowledged diminishing depth of reflection over the intervention period. As reflective journaling became routine, some students defaulted to formulaic entries that mimicked the surface structure of reflection without engaging substantive metacognitive content. One participant commented: "A couple of weeks in, I started writing the same things over and over, 'Check your grammar, improve organization.' It was formulaic, not reflective."

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that reflective writing tasks constitute a highly effective instructional intervention for enhancing EFL learner engagement across all four dimensions of the multidimensional engagement framework. The very large effect sizes obtained ($\eta^2 = .775-.837$) substantially exceed those typically reported in engagement intervention studies in EFL contexts, suggesting that RWTs tap into particularly potent engagement mechanisms. The ITSD design permits a level of causal inference that cross-sectional and pre-post designs cannot provide: the stable pre-intervention baselines, the sharp engagement increase between PRE 3 and POST 1 (the "intervention leap"), and the sustained post-intervention plateau collectively constitute a pattern consistent with a genuine intervention effect (Sims et al., 2022; St.Clair et al., 2016).

The predominance of Social Engagement as the dimension showing the largest effect ($\eta^2 = .837$) is a theoretically significant finding that aligns with sociocultural accounts of learning (Bui & Nguyen, 2026; Romero & Bobkina, 2026). The collaborative reflection-sharing component of the RWT intervention appears to have been a particularly potent catalyst for engagement, creating social accountability structures and shared epistemic goals that incentivized sustained participation. This finding resonates with Liang and Wu's (2025) observation that social context mediates individual engagement and suggests that the social architecture of reflective practice may be as important as its cognitive content. It also aligns with Teng and Huang's (2026) work on feedback engagement, which similarly found social-interactive dimensions of feedback processes to be highly engagement-generative.

The relatively smaller, though still very large, effect for Emotional Engagement ($\eta^2 = .775$) is consistent with findings from Chen (2026) and Rad et al. (2026), who note that affective dimensions of engagement tend to respond more slowly and variably to instructional interventions than behavioral or cognitive dimensions. The qualitative Theme 2 data, however, indicate that emotional transformation did occur, with participants describing meaningful reductions in writing anxiety and an emergent positive emotional relationship with argumentative writing. The lag in emotional engagement change relative to behavioral and cognitive change suggests that affective scaffolding may require extended intervention periods or more targeted emotional support structures to achieve maximum effect.

The thematic finding of declining reflective depth over time (Theme 4) is a practically important caution. As observed by Chan et al. (2021), sustaining high-quality reflection requires deliberate pedagogical maintenance through meta-reflective activities, progressive complexity in reflection prompts, and explicit instruction in the characteristics of deep versus surface reflection. The present intervention did not fully anticipate this trajectory, and future implementations should incorporate periodic "meta-reflection" sessions in which students critically evaluate the quality of their own reflective practices. This finding also highlights the importance of teacher professional development in reflective practice pedagogy, a need identified for the Ethiopian context by Asmare et al. (2025) and Galana et al. (2023).

Compared with Hegarty et al.'s (2026) multi-modal engagement model, the present findings affirm that behavioral, cognitive, affective, and social engagement are empirically distinguishable but theoretically interconnected. The parallel significant effects across all four dimensions suggest that reflective writing tasks engage the whole learner simultaneously, a holistic quality that may partially explain the magnitude of the effects observed. Ceylan and Korkmaz (2026) demonstrate that engagement levels predict academic achievement across proficiency levels, implying that the engagement gains documented in this study should translate into improved argumentative writing performance, a relationship that warrants direct examination in future research with combined engagement and writing quality outcome measures.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the effects of reflective writing tasks on EFL learner engagement in argumentative essay writing, employing an interrupted time-series design with six measurement points and a concurrent qualitative component. The evidence indicates that reflective writing tasks produced statistically significant, substantially large, and temporally sustained increases in behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social engagement among third-year EFL learners at a public university in southern Ethiopia. Social and behavioral engagement demonstrated the largest effects, while qualitative data illuminated the mechanisms of change, metacognitive activation, affective reorientation, and collaborative community-building, alongside the challenge of maintaining reflective depth over time.

These findings carry several implications. Theoretically, they contribute to the growing evidence base demonstrating engagement's malleability and its responsiveness to carefully designed instructional interventions. Engagement should be conceptualized not as a stable learner attribute but as an emergent property of the instructional ecology, cultivable, measurable, and teachable. Pedagogically, EFL writing instructors are urged to adopt structured reflective writing frameworks that target each engagement dimension through appropriately designed prompts: metacognitive questions for cognitive engagement, affective expression prompts for emotional engagement, collaborative sharing protocols for social engagement, and process documentation for behavioral engagement. The observed challenge of declining

reflective depth underscores the need for periodic meta-reflective activities and explicit instruction in reflection quality criteria.

The study acknowledges several limitations. The single-site design with a relatively small sample ($N = 30$) limits generalizability, and the absence of a comparison group constrains causal inference despite the ITSD's temporal controls. The 12-week intervention period, while capturing immediate and early maintenance effects, does not speak to longer-term engagement trajectories. Future research should employ multi-site designs with larger samples, incorporate direct measures of writing quality alongside engagement, and investigate the differential effects of specific RWT components to determine which elements most powerfully drive each engagement dimension. Longitudinal follow-up studies tracking engagement beyond the intervention period would further illuminate the durability of gains documented here.

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. Participants were fully informed of the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the research, and they provided written consent prior to their involvement. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions concerning participant confidentiality.

Author Contributions

Zewudu Paulos: Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Writing – Original Draft; Project Administration.

Sualah Mussa: Validation; Writing – Review & Editing; Supervision.

Getinet Bilew: Validation; Writing – Review & Editing; Supervision. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Ethics Statement

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the host university. All participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement in the study. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Pseudonyms have been used in the reporting of qualitative data to protect participant identities. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used Grammarly, ChatGPT, Writefull, and DeepL Write solely for language betterment, including grammar correction, refining sentence structure, and improving conciseness, clarity, and overall readability. No generative AI technologies were used for idea generation, hypothesis development, data analysis, result interpretation, or drawing conclusions.

Following the use of these tools, the author(s) thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as needed, maintaining complete oversight and taking full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of the manuscript.

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