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# Boosting students' reflection on English learning in the Vietnamese context

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Reflection used as one of the learning activities can significantly benefit learners, both academically and affectively. However, empirical practices are still in deficit worldwide, especially in the field of English as a foreign language (EFL) education. The present study applied a three-thematic-prompt model for learner reflection to EFL students from a university. These three themes are (i) current motivation for English learning, (ii) personal learning experiences, and (iii) improvement plans. Participants in the present study were provided the model to write personal reflections on their English learning over the first year at college. Although it was an optional homework assignment, nearly 100% of the participants completed and submitted their learner reflection papers afterwards. Exploratory results from the submitted papers' content analysis are insightfully manifold. Students anchored seven subthemes for theme one, another seven subthemes for theme two, and ten subthemes for theme three. It proves that the applied model is constructively usable for attaining the robust power of learner reflection because it came out with not just learned values to students but also practically pedagogical insights for teachers.

## KEYWORDS

EFL, English learning, learner reflection, learning needs, self-regulated learning (SRL)

## 1 Introduction

On self-regulated learning (SRL), [Zimmerman et al. \(2017\)](#) displayed a three-phase model: (a) *forethought*, which includes goal setting and strategic planning, (b) *performance/volitional control*, represented by activating different strategies and techniques to self-motivate and monitor learning processes involved, and (c) *self-reflection*, when the learner self-evaluates their learning outcomes, and thereby projecting subsequent learning stages. As a result, learner reflection, one of the founding components of SRL, should be intentionally nurtured for learners. For learner reflection values, [Rusche and Jason \(2011\)](#) relay that giving students an opportunity to self-reflect on what they learn not only can alleviate some frustration from learning workload and learn how to learn but also can deepen acquisition on the learning material. This reflection is particularly essential for those learners who are struggling (which is generally prevalent nowadays, especially in the university where the present study was conducted). On that backdrop of self-reflection, teachers can offer students constructive support; thus, timely preventing the stress-driven burnout ([Pham and Duong, 2024](#); [Xu et al., 2022](#); [Zolkapli et al., 2024](#)), where students are likely tempted to self-adopt a negative sense of failure or inability to succeed. However, research on this topic has not provided specific steps or ways to operate relevant activities performed by students as a form of SRL outside the classroom, especially applied to those majoring in English as a foreign language (EFL). Thus, with that in

mind, the present study aimed to address this research gap. The specific results from the present study would advance the current understanding of learner reflection in EFL education, particularly in the Vietnamese context, where English learning has been promoted throughout the country (Prime Minister, 2025). It also offers some specific guidelines for classroom teachers to incorporate this learner self-reflection approach into the main streamline of regular instruction.

## 1.1 Benefits of learner reflection

Learner reflection is characterized by several variables and dimensions (Boud and Walker, 1998; Chaudhary, 2025; Ogden and Claus, 1997; Rodgers, 2002). These basically include: (i) it is a process which occurs at different points and levels for different aims, (ii) critical learner reflection benefits significant learning, (iii) learner reflection boosts self-regulation, and (iv) learner reflection skills are learnable, i.e., it can be taught. Meanwhile, Cavilla (2017) contends that when constructive learner reflection is present in the process of learning, its effects are positive and worth exploring. On that premise, Cavilla purposefully implemented written reflection (students wrote reflection papers by answering given prompt questions attached to their regular English assignments) for eight weeks to high school students. Most of them were low achievers with little engagement in completing their academic subject assignments. The results show that although there was no significant correlation between reflection activities involved and academic performances among the participants, Cavilla gained some positive outcomes in terms of affective dimensions. More than 84% of the students' motivation and efforts to complete their assignments improved. Most of them showcased determination to achieve the maximum grades possible.

Meanwhile, Dalsgaard (2018) developed the construct of *situated reflection* with two components. One was *empirical reflection* as evaluation of the consequences of actions in relation to the action goal. The other was *theoretical reflection* as evaluation of the consequences of actions in relation to a concept or theory not inherent in the empirical situation. Dalsgaard used this reflection approach to investigate its indicative instances and impacts on learning among upper high schoolers while they were jointly or individually creating concrete products such as a TV commercial, sculpture, or chair. By directly observing, taking notes, picturing, and interviewing these school students in action, Dalsgaard found that both empirical and theoretical reflections were utilized by the students involved and that the reflections positively impacted the students' learning at different working phases. The study by Mella (2022) also documented the positive impacts of reflection writing on high school students because this approach stimulated students to reinforce the knowledge learned, assumption testing, self-correction, synthesizing knowledge from different subject matters, and positioning specific learning environments.

Still, participants in the studies by Cavilla (2017), Dalsgaard (2018), and Mella (2022) were all high school students, not college English-majored students (like those who were involved in the present study). Furthermore, the specific sources of

increased motivation or improvement plans for subsequent learning steps were not explicitly displayed. The present study addressed these points as seen in the next sections.

Concurrently, Iman et al. (2024) interviewed six university students from Pakistan and found that practicing reflective activities at the university level boosted their critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and self-awareness. A recent study by Schürmann et al. (2025) involving teamwork among 15 students from Germany also noticed positive impacts on participants' peer collaboration, psychological safety, self-regulation, and reflection skills. Although the studies by Iman et al. (2024) and Schürmann et al. (2025) involved college students, they were not EFL students from the learning environments like that of the Vietnamese context with little exposure to English uses outside the classroom. In addition, the interplaying variables of motivation, personal experience, and plans for learning improvement were still underexamined.

## 1.2 Justifications for the present study

As seen above, learner reflection is beneficial to the immediate learning process, academically, emotionally, and metacognitively in one way or another. However, such inquiries like those by Calliva (2017), Dalsgaard (2018), Mella et al. (2022), Iman et al. (2024), Schürmann et al. (2025), and others joining this line of research on learner reflection practice and its impacts (Haile et al., 2024; Robbins et al., 2020; Sweet, 2022; Van Herpen et al., 2020; Walkerden, 2025) are still far from saturated, especially among EFL learners. Furthermore, past learner reflection-based research has provided little insight about participants' self-evaluation on their current motivation, personal experiences accumulated, and specific plans for English learning among university students. Thus, these learning-based dimensions would be further explored by the present study.

The possibilities to explore learner reflection issues as a tool of learning facilitation in the EFL classroom are enormous because the process of mastering English takes quite a long time period with different developmental stages (Ellis, 1994; Lowie et al., 2017; Richards, 1974). This long-term process essentially involves a dynamic complex system of interplaying variables (both internal and external) subject to individual characteristics, and where, when, and how the learning takes place (Dörnyei, 2005). On the language acquisition jointly operated by different subsystems and learner environments, Lowie et al. (2017) posit that: "the interaction of developing subsystems will be manifested in a great deal of variability in the learner's language. Because learners may have different starting points and learning contexts, variation among learners is also bound to exist" (p.133).

From this informed complexity and wide variations among learners, EFL teachers could purposefully and appropriately harness the values of learner reflection at various points or phases of the learner's developmental subsystems. These may include phases of learning and acquiring the competences in English grammar, English lexical items, English phonological-orthographic systems, etc. On that perspective added by the confirmed values of learner reflection, the researcher of the present study attempted to intentionally deliver an opportunity

for EFL students to freely reflect on their English learning at college.

The present study served as an outlet for participants to renew their useful awareness on the learning journey at college, mindfully defining identities, involved factors, and learning goals (Rodgers, 2002; Shen, 2022). As Colley et al. (2012), advocating learner reflection applications, contend that “Having students reflect on their efforts as they move through the learning process presents the possibility of creating mindfulness during the learning process” (p.13). Although being in the same line of learner reflection, the present study made itself different from past research by delving into three specific dimensions on learner reflection. These relevant dimensions (which have still been underinvestigated by and large) are deemed to robustly benefit EFL students for their next learning stages at college. To its end, the present study raised the guiding question: How do EFL students self-reflect on their English learning in relation to three relevant dimensions of (1) current motivation, (2) personal experiences, and (3) improvement plans?

## 2 Research method

### 2.1 The background and participants

The present study applied learner reflection at a local university (in Vietnam). This type of classroom activity has yet to be scheduled either mandatorily or optionally in any learning courses across the board of all disciplines at this university, which is primarily translated that all class time sessions should be focused exclusively on course contents. As a result, learner reflection is unpopular among most faculty members in the university although its learning values have been evidently backed up by research reports (documented by some typical ones above). The absence of learner reflection practices, especially at the end of each learning course, is mostly because class time is limited in higher education and it is mainly concentrated on course-related issues (Cotten and Wilson, 2006; Schneider and Preckel, 2017; Van Herpen et al., 2020). Thus, it implies that students hardly have, specially for large-sized classes, sufficient opportunity in the classroom or behind the class hours to fully voice all their self-evaluations, problems, concerns or specific learning needs, in the reflective manner. Since it was the first time to be done on learner reflection among EFL students at this university, the present study was primarily characterized as an exploratory research, which aimed to capture preliminary results (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Thereby, pedagogical implications could be pointed out for implementation and further inquiries could be taken place.

Since the present researcher came from the EFL discipline, he contacted the Foreign Languages Faculty of the research-site university. After presenting the purpose, values, and working procedure of the present study to the faculty, the researcher was permitted by the Dean to work with the faculty teacher who was running one English-writing class already scheduled in the 2024–2025 academic year at this university. Therefore, the sampling in this case was a convenience one, meaning that the sample was already established for investigation (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). This intact class comprised 43 Vietnamese-speaking students, 9

males and 34 females, aged between 19 and 20. They were sophomores majoring in EFL and just finished their first year of learning at the university (i.e., they were at the beginning of their second year at this time). Their English proficiency was around intermediate under Vietnam’s current reference framework of foreign language competence (MOET, 2018). To attain their college goals, these sophomores were required to develop their crucial skills of SRL sufficiently (Do, 2025; MOET, 2021) over their 4-year learning processes. They should also sustain these skills after graduation from college. Thus, the present study was aligned with these long-term orientations by boosting students’ self-reflection embedded in SRL outside the classroom.

### 2.2 The instrument and data collection

Following the relevant literature, especially the *self-reflection* phase in the three-phase model of SRL (Zimmerman et al., 2017), and guided by the research question addressed earlier, the researcher came up with a learner reflection model embedded with three themes:

- (1) Thematic prompt 1 (Motivation): *How would you say about your current motivation in English learning? What primarily motivates your current English learning?*
- (2) Thematic prompt 2 (Personal experiences): *How would you share your past English learning experiences of success or failure lessons?*
- (3) Thematic prompt 3 (Improvement plans): *What should you do to improve your English learning in the coming years?*

The researcher argues that these three themes are closely interrelated and essential for student reflection. It is significant for students to reflect on theme (1) because they must know what they are pursuing and why they are doing that (i.e., for what purposes/aims they set up and engage in). Then, on defining their personal pursuits and aims together with the perceived values that mastering English would ultimately bring about, students are expected to be more self-motivated for learning (Atkinson, 1957; Dörnyei, 2005). This includes self-reflecting on theme (2) related to previous learning experiences and outcomes (both successful and unsuccessful lessons) on a cognitive comparison manner, which helped build up learning self-efficacy and personal agency (Bandura, 1990). Subsequently, it likely results in theme (3), which involves future strategic courses of actions based on self-assessments to attain planned goals under the SRL frame (Zimmerman et al., 2017). This three-theme interrelated model has not been sufficiently explored in past research, especially in the Vietnamese context of EFL education at college by and large.

Before applying this three-theme learner reflection model embedded in SRL, the researcher presented it to the Dean and faculty teacher as mentioned above. Both approved it. Then, it was also piloted among ten EFL-major students to gain the validity of the model. The result showed that it worked well. Students understood the model instruction given and wrote their self-reflections as expected. Upon the arranged appointment, the researcher paid an in-person visit to the designated writing class

addressed above and invited all students from this class to participate in the target study. At this contact session, the students were explicitly informed by the researcher about the purpose, values, and requirements of the research project. Especially, students should recognize that the reflection model was just like an optional homework assignment. That meant it had nothing to do with the course grade. In addition, the relevant results would be reported on a total anonymity in the study.

For ease, students might write the reflection in English or Vietnamese language (their mother tongue) and submit it via private emails to the researcher within two weeks. Thus, instead of doing it right in the classroom within a short period, they had two weeks to complete it. For reliability, students were requested to write it with absolute honesty and whole-heartedness. They were also encouraged to write in English, instead of Vietnamese, to practice their English writing skills as well. Two weeks later, the researcher received 35 (out of 43) reflection papers, meaning that eight of them declined as this homework was optional.

### 2.3 Data analysis

On receiving the reflection papers, the researcher first checked the paper contents to make sure they were valid upon the project model requirements. Then, he made phone calls to each and all students who submitted their reflection papers. These calls were aimed to (1) thank students for submissions, (2) double-check their consent involving in the present study, and especially, (3) confirming the reliability of released information (i.e., the researcher cited main points one by one from the reflection paper and requested the student to confirm). All students confirmed their honest reflections. Then, in the light of the literature related to thematic analysis (King and Brooks, 2018; Qoyyimah, 2023; Younas et al., 2023), the researcher on his own started coding, categorizing, analyzing, and making interpretations of the collected papers, reiteratively individual papers in isolation, comparatively, and collectively across the board with substantive reference to the three thematic prompt questions (applied in the present study). Specifically, three key coding steps were applied (ibid): (i) examining all the collected papers thoroughly and coding raw items into the three target themes (i.e., motivation, personal experience, and improvemet plan, respectively), (2) grouping theme-sharing items into subthemes (e.g., *sources of motivation, providing unique learning methods, locating specific areas to improve*), (3) relevant interpretations and quotations from the papers were made on each subtheme.

Before the writing phase started, the researcher sent the analyzed results to the faculty teacher for checking (meaning that the faculty teacher would work as an independent auditor in this case). Then, one month later, we both worked together in person to double-check each and all the papers, making intensive considerations for those disagreement cases to reach the jointly final agreement.

### 2.4 Research ethics in consideraton

The current study complied strictly with the research guidelines regulated by the university. Accordingly, this study

was absolutely permitted by the university and voluntary participation was gained from the target students before it was officially operated. Principles on anonymity and confidentiality were completely implemented for all participants. Additionally, all participants clearly recognized that they could leave the study at any point without any subsequent consequences with reference to both academic and non-academic ones. Probably because of that, as seen below, the researcher received nothing from eight students.

## 3 Results and discussion

Although students did not have to write or submit the reflection paper (as it was optional), more than 90% of them sent their papers (35/43), and particularly, all received papers covered all three thematic prompts as seen in Tables 1–3 below. This clearly indicates that the students took the reflection seriously, displaying their awareness, which more or less boosted their learning process.

The overall results show that the three-thematic-prompt model of learner reflection used in the present study is tentatively usable, being incorporated into the classroom as homework assignments (which thereby promoted students' SRL). Thus, this approach should cost nothing for regular

TABLE 1 Reflections on the current motivation for English learning (N<sub>0</sub> = 35 papers in total).

Subthemes	N <sub>0</sub>	%
(1) Making motivation comparisons	35	100
(2) Providing sources/reasons for current English learning	35	100
(3) Attributing future career success as a primary motivator for current English learning	35	100
(4) Identifying secondary motivators (parents' encouragement)	30	85.71
(5) Defining tertiary motivators (teachers and peers' encouragement)	28	80.00
(6) Identifying current English learning motivation stronger	19	54.28
(7) Noticing sometimes motivation a bit weaker and pinpointing causes/reasons	12	34.28

TABLE 2 Personal experiences on English learning.

Subthemes	N <sub>0</sub>	%
(8) Making personal declarations	35	100
(9) Sharing specific learning strategies	35	100
(10) Emphasizing self-regulated learning	32	91.42
(11) Endorsing the daily learning and practice	27	77.14
(12) Pinpointing the importance of English pronunciation and speaking skills	23	65.71
(13) Addressing the crucial role of English grammar and vocabulary	22	62.85
(14) Providing unique methods	10	28.57

TABLE 3 Making plans for English learning.

Subthemes	N <sub>o</sub>	%
(15) Casting personal assessments on current English development	35	100
(16) Recognizing personal English development in specific areas	35	100
(17) Denoting metacognitive enhancement	35	100
(18) Delivering personal plans for English learning	35	100
(19) Locating specific areas to improve	35	100
(20) Specifying what and how to take learning actions	35	100
(21) Aiming to elevate GPA	25	71.42
(22) Identifying focal practices in English listening-speaking skills	22	62.85
(23) Gearing to enhancing English pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary	16	45.71
(24) Stating the need for English writing skills improvement	13	37.14

inside-class activities to provide students an equal opportunity to intentionally look back on their English learning system and subsystems. It involves self-talking, pondering, figuring out, deliberating, making judgments, casting metacognitive revisions, formulating, and spelling out genuine experiences. These critical reflections are of robust importance because students will mostly carry it with them into not only subsequent stages of learning but highly likely into their future careers and whole life in the 21st century (Colley et al., 2012; Zimmerman et al., 2017).

However, the fact that less than 50% of the papers were written in English implicates that most of these sophomores did not feel very confident about their English writing skill although this was an English writing class. As a result of this finding, pedagogically it calls for more attention and support from teachers. All EFL teachers know well that the ability to master a decent command of written English for EFL college students is essential but poses a challenging job to many of them due to its interactively dynamic, complicated subsystems embedded (Dörnyei, 2005; Ellis, 1994; Lowie et al., 2017; Richards, 1974). Therefore, teachers in charge of the English writing skill should provide more opportunity for students to practice this productive skill in different types (e.g., letters, narratives, cause-effect essays, and so on), both inside and outside the classroom.

The detailed results are reported below in the order of the three thematic prompts. In each theme, subthemes are collated across the board. Then, extracts from the submitted papers are given for illustration.

### 3.1 Thematic prompt 1: motivation identified

Paper/P3 below is a typical paper making a comparison on motivation, subtheme (1), confirming that it is now stronger than before, subtheme (6), and offering the primary and secondary sources, subthemes (2), (3), and (4).

My motivation for English learning is stronger at college. Future career success is the motivator for my current learning. I always tell myself that learning is key to success.

In addition, my parents empower me to learn better. They frequently encourage me to try best in learning for future success. Taking their instructions, I am currently attempting to work harder, living up to their expectations. (P3)

Meanwhile, P8 addresses a slight fluctuation in English learning at some points, subtheme (7), and its major cause.

At times I used to feel less interested in English learning than before. Perhaps it was partly because my curiosity about it went down and partly because the learning coursework was getting harder to me. Yet, I decided not to give up and refresh my motivation to step up for accomplishment as long as I keep trying consistently. (P8)

Following is P13 defining the role of teachers and peers/classmates as a third learning motivator at college, subtheme (5):

The friendliness and encouragement from teachers and peers help refine my motivation. In such a collaborative, friendly environment, learning is deemed to be constructive. I really appreciate their support and encouragement over the past year, during which I encountered many difficulties in learning and adapting myself to new environments at this university.

It is gratifying to learn that they all (100%) seriously reflected on their current motivation, made comparisons, and especially were able to identify the main source of their motivation (future career/employment) as an instrumentally oriented motivation. This suggests they all knew well that they were intentionally learning and mastering English because they would possibly use it as an advantageous condition/qualification or supportive instrument for job-seeking and career development after college graduation. This motive for learning the language is significant to them via locating themselves as qualified enough to take part in a potential job market or working environment requiring English proficiency. In other words, students clearly perceived the practical values from EFL mastery and were motivated to achieve it as expected.

Remarkably, 85.71% of the students acknowledged that their parents/family grounds motivated them to move forward (subtheme 4). This finding is hardly surprising because it reflects that EFL students as adult learners like those in the present study are closely tied to family relationships, unfolding a significant trait of Eastern cultural traditions like that of Vietnam. To the best of the researcher's observation, this insightful revelation (self-reflected by EFL students) has not been reported in previous research regarding the state of learning motivation after they have experienced the first year's transitional phase at college with a high risk of dropping out. This particular finding suggests that parents (with adult children like those in the present study) should take closer care of their children when they enter the first year at college and timely take sufficient interventions when needed. As a result, it implicates that as long as students successfully adapt during the first year, they will unlikely discontinue their college learning (or drop out). Thus, parents in association with teachers and college administrators should pay special attention to freshmen with decent support, especially to

those low-achievers in English learning, who are vulnerable to dropping out (Pham and Duong, 2024).

The third source of motivation revealed by 28 papers (80.00%) was teachers' and peers' encouragement and support (subtheme 5). This finding confirms what has been reported in Schneider and Preckel (2017) and Van Herpen et al. (2020), which all showcase the positive contributions of teacher-student and student-student interactions to freshmen weathering hard times at college. Thus, apart from regular classroom schedules, it is pedagogically suggested that institutions and teachers should frequently create different healthy, constructive extra-curriculum activities and occasions (such as multiple club activities of English uses, English learning forums, self-study groups, same-interest groups, etc.) for freshmen in particular. These supplementary activities are believed to benefit students (both affectively – feeling at home, generating a sense of belonging, and cohesiveness as soon as possible; and cognitively – developing appropriate learning methods at college, which jointly boost students' SRL). As Brophy (2004) delivers this recommendation to teachers: "Developing your students' motivation to learn involves socializing it as a general disposition as well as stimulating it situationally in the process of implementing lessons and learning activities" (p.23).

Overall, three key sources of learning motivation among EFL-major participants in the present study were clearly pointed out, in the order of importance: future job, family, and support from teachers and friends. Thereby, given that learning motivation plays an crucial role in EFL education and sustained SRL (Do, 2025; Dörnyei, 2005; Ellis, 1994), it advocates for continual assistance from schools, teachers, and family.

### 3.2 Thematic prompt 2: personal experiences shared

The following is the extract from P23 communicating personal declarations of self-study, studying in groups, and practicing pronunciation regularly; that is subthemes (8), (9), (10), (11), and (12).

Through my practical experience of studying at university, now I have learned some things like self-study is the most important thing. Besides, it is advisable to study in groups to exchange learning tips with each other. To speak English well, it is necessary to practice pronunciation regularly and practice in front of the mirror to be more confident when speaking in front of a crowd. (P23)

Meanwhile, P35 below underlines self-regulated learning at college in comparison to that at high school and the daily learning practices, subthemes (10) and (11).

Self-regulation of learning is the best policy, rather than being mostly dependent on teachers as in high school. I recognize that this is key to success, not only at college but also for life-long learning. Therefore, I am persistently following my learning policy of daily practices. (P35)

Paper 1 comes up with a unique method of English first, followed by Vietnamese, subtheme (14), and capitalizes the role of English vocabulary, subtheme (13):

Experiencing learning at college, I have now drawn up a principle for learning English; that is when thinking about something, I will do it in English first, followed by Vietnamese. This helps me better in English communication. It also enriches my English vocabulary by using it in real-life. Having a rich resource of English vocabulary is beneficial for English communication. (P1)

Regarding the second thematic prompt, it is also encouraging to see that all the papers productively made personal declarations and specific strategies for English learning (Table 2). Noticeably, most of the papers (91.41%) emphasized the principle of self-study and self-regulation (subtheme 10). This suggests that the students recognized well their own learning responsibility at college (and no longer the same as in high school). Considering the universal tendency to temptedly use the first language while learning the second language among EFL learners, it is interesting and recommendable to learn P1's specific method of integrating the second (English) and the first (Vietnamese) in English learning by self-regulating her thinking acts (namely, purposefully using the second ahead of the first in verbalizing thoughts). This finding has not been reported in past research in the SRL line. It also implicates how to constructively integrate the use of first language into EFL education.

Approaching even more proactively, another student anchored herself to this self-regulation (P6): "Taking English as my daily life", (i.e., use it day by day). Equally recommendable is the self-regulation voiced by P30 on the stress of dealing with the burden of unknown English vocabulary (commonly confronted by many EFL learners): "Not try packing all words into my mind, but focus on those I need first". Thus, it could be said that each of these unique self-regulations revealed in the present study would not have existed unless its owner had experienced a sufficient amount of time (one year or so) learning English intentionally and dedicatedly in concrete environments and specific situations. So, based on what the second thematic prompt has gained, it demonstrates that all students have been able to identify themselves as dynamic English learners because now they are holding with them some distinct how-to-learn-English principles or personal lessons, arising from their authentically situated learning processes in actual socio-cultural contexts.

The aforesaid personal English learning principles are the tangible products of *theoretical reflection* (Dalsgaard, 2018), triggering the metacognitive skills in actual use. That said, over a while of learning English, the involved students moved up from the empirically cognitive level (e.g., taking part in regular academic learning activities such as reading English texts, looking up the dictionary for unknown vocabulary, translating English to Vietnamese, writing English essays, and more) to the higher level of metacognitive thinking. In another sense, although the process of learning and mastering EFL is impacted by a multitude of variables embedded in inherent subsystems (Dörnyei, 2005; Ellis, 1994; Lowie et al., 2017; Richards, 1974) as well as temporal dimensions, these meaningful metacognitive

products are deemed to enrich student learning profiles. Furthermore, it not only defines them as real distinct learners but very likely facilitating their subsequent learning phases for goal attainments under the SRL frame (Zimmerman et al., 2017). Thus, the learner reflection model applied by the present study not only provided a suitable space for students to shape up their current learning motivation (as seen from the thematic prompt 1 earlier), it also benefits them by boosting their critical thinking skills based on what has been experienced personally. These lived experiences and specific English strategies learning are deemed to offer scaffolding for students to confidently vision their next learning stages navigated towards their specified needs.

### 3.3 Thematic prompt 3: plans visioned

Next is P30's self-assessments, subthemes (15)-(16), while P14 and P18 express their plans for English learning, respectively, as follows.

I think I have grown a lot as an English learner. My abilities are definitely better many times compared to my high school time. Back then, my listening skill was still bad, and my grammar was messed up. (P30)

For the coming time I need to focus on speaking skill because my English pronunciation is not good enough and my English grammar knowledge is not good, either. I want to better my grades in speaking skill. I plan to learn one grammar lesson each day and speaking skill via communicative English videos and internet exercises. (P14)

I'll keep improving my lexical source and listening skill. I think I should learn vocabulary through the internet and movie, or music, so I won't get bored. I'll also listen to more English podcasts on TED (P18).

Although being one of the high-achievers, P3 below still centralizes on English writing skills, subtheme (24):

I think I want to improve my writing skills because I sometimes struggle with the limited time that the teacher gives when I write essays. To improve that, I think I should spend more time writing essays as well as finding out some material on the Internet to help me have more ideas when I write. (P3)

Tracking back the development of English learning processes is another meaningful insight discovered in the present study via the third thematic prompt (Table 3). This has not been mentioned in past research on SRL among EFL college students. It shows that 100% of the submitted papers offered self-assessments on English learning outcomes. Interestingly, they all acknowledged that their current English proficiency level was better than before across the board, all high-, average- and low-achievers, subtheme (15). This probably accounts for why instead of dropping out they successfully completed the first-year learning phase in the face of multiple common challenges (socially and academically) or a big gap between what they had passed by at previous high school and what actually occurred at

college while undertaking it. This finding also agrees well with what has been found from the first thematic prompt above, where all the students found their current motivation for English learning better than before (Table 1, subtheme 6).

Not only that, based on self-assessment results, they all were absolutely aware of what they needed to invest maximal efforts in, clearly displayed in their specified plans and goals for the upcoming phases. As seen in Table 3, elevating specific course grades or overall GPA was short-term goals for more than half of them (subtheme-21). Meanwhile, more than 50% aimed at gaining strong English listening-speaking skills (subtheme-22) and nearly 50% underpinned the need for a rich stock of grammatical and lexical English resources (subtheme-23). These learning needs expressed by the participants more or less reflect their current learning setting, where the opportunity to employ English spoken skills (listening-speaking, subtheme 22) is still in deficit. Probably because of a limited practice on listening-speaking skills, their existing stock of English grammar, lexis, and pronunciation still remains virtually inactive, non-strengthened, or non-modified. Taking into account a vast number of complicated ingredients embedded in EFL oral competencies (Dörnyei, 2005; Ellis, 1994), these goal-meeting needs among the participants are justified. Thereby, these insightful findings on English learning needs again define the involved students as unique, dynamic, responsible learners (Rodgers, 2002; Shen, 2022), who know very well about their ongoing learning orientations and actions taken responsively based on prior experiences and goals set (Colley et al., 2012). On the other hand, the revealed needs send useful, pedagogical messages to EFL teachers (the faculty teacher and the present researcher included). Teachers, therefore, should mindfully tailor their instructional activities inside and outside the classroom in such a way that could meet these meaningful, justified needs as much as possible (particularly the opportunity to use and develop English spoken skills in authentic situations).

Pedagogical implications from the aforementioned findings are without taking student needs into ample consideration by either (i) consciously placing ourselves in the position of students to make full sense of their needs or (ii) helpfully coordinate with them to figure out within available resources the best ways to target the needs successfully, we as teachers would likely be at a certain risk of becoming demotivators to students (Dörnyei, 2005; Mella, 2022). Therefore, learner reflection as applied by the present study proves to bring down-on-earth values to not just students but teachers alike. This is because by relying on student needs and mindfully reflecting on these needs, teachers can confidently know what they should do to support and empower students at best. In other words, values (as evidenced by the present study) from learner reflection are highly viable for both learners and teachers, the two key stakeholders in the realm of education.

## 4 Conclusion

Considering the current scarcity of research on learner reflection worldwide, particularly in EFL education, the present study framed itself on a tentatively working three-thematic-prompt model for learner reflection. Participants were EFL Vietnamese students from

a local university, where this type of beneficial learning activity was mostly absent. Obtained results are insightfully manifold. It proves the applied model is constructively usable because it brings not just learning values to students (revising motivation, self-assessing, identifying experiences, making personal declarations, and self-regulating actions in the directions of set goals for upcoming learning stages; thus identifying themselves as distinct self-regulated learners). It also provides practically pedagogical insights. Accordingly, teachers should take these messages into consideration for instructional plans, which should be in sufficient agreement with students' justified needs and pursued goals. As a result, in addition to the on-the-spot/short-term reflection approach (within one single course or learning session) seen in Calliva (2017), Dalsgaard (2018), Haile et al. (2024), and Iman et al. (2024), the stage-end reflection (over a period of learning) as applied in the present study is highly promising.

However, with a limited number of participants (35), what has been found in the present study is still initial results rather than comprehensive or exhaustive (given that it was shaped as an exploratory study from the beginning as addressed above). Despite multiple new findings revealed, further inquiries are widely open within the EFL field and beyond until it really reaches a saturated point, i.e., when nothing new is found. Alternatively and novelly integrated approaches to operate the construct of learner reflection are also encouraged depending on specific socio-cultural contexts and subject matters. The ultimate aim is to appropriately engage students in their learning and help them evolve in due course to be effectively self-regulated learners using personal reflection as one of the essential equipment for sustainable learning and productive life.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Ethics statement

Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

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