Arab World English Journal
INTERNATIONAL PEER REVIEWED JOURNAL ISSN: 2229-9327

Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Volume 17. Number 3, September 2026 Pp. 488-508
DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol17no3.25

Exploring Saudi Female University Students' English Narrative Writing Experiences and Perceptions in Fictional and Nonfictional Genres

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Received: 06/05/2026 Accepted: 08/24/2024 Published: 09/10/2026

Abstract

Despite its pedagogical value, narrative writing remains underutilized in Saudi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curricula, and limited research has examined Saudi female university students' experiences and perceptions of fictional and nonfiction genres. This study explored the integration of narrative writing as a genre into the English language teaching curriculum for university learners in Saudi Arabia, articulated the underlying theoretical framework, and examined the role of narratives in EFL classrooms. It combined quantitative and qualitative techniques to evaluate the experiences and perceptions of personal narrative writing and to inform the design of meaningful literacy tasks for language learners. Students' narratives were analyzed using content and thematic approaches, supplemented by descriptive and linguistic analyses. Their responses to the task-completion questions were examined to understand their perceptions of the writing experience and emotional engagement. The results demonstrate that the effective and purposeful use of narrative writing can maximize learners' creativity and engagement with the target language, enhance their language knowledge, cultivate creative writing skills, and increase enjoyment. These findings contribute to the field of English language pedagogy and support English language educators and researchers in developing strategies and methods for improving students' writing skills. Integrating narrative writing into EFL classes is recommended to enhance language fluency, personal voices, and learner engagement.

Keywords: Creative writing, emotional tone, English as a foreign language learners, fictional narrative, narrative writing, nonfictional narrative

How to cite: Saaty, A. A. (2026). Exploring Saudi Female University Students' English Narrative Writing Experiences and Perceptions in Fictional and Nonfictional Genres. *Arab World English Journal, 17*(3): 488-508. https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol17no3.25

Introduction

Developing writing skills in English as a foreign language (EFL) setting can be challenging because of limited exposure to the language and insufficient classroom time (Gepila, 2018). Writing skills require grammatical accuracy, coherence, organization, appropriate vocabulary, and cultural awareness (Hyland, 2019). Among the various pedagogical strategies, creative writing and narrative writing have been increasingly recognized as effective approaches to writing instruction because they foster language development and promote learner agency, empowerment, and motivation (Hanauer, 2012, 2015; Nicholes, 2020, 2022; Saaty, 2019, 2023, 2025).

Narrative writing is a subgenre of creative writing that can be presented in oral or written form (Anderson & Anderson, 1997). Writers typically recount fictional or nonfictional experiences, events, or occurrences in their lives (Jubhari et al., 2022; Kırkgöz, 2014) through chronologically connected events (Saaty, 2025). Beyond developing linguistic competence, narrative writing cultivates creativity and critical thinking and enables students' self-expression (Wongsasawat & Waewchimplee, 2025). Narrative writing enhances students' confidence in using the target language by engaging them with personal experiences and emotions (Saaty, 2025). This enables them to explore language use in authentic contexts, develop compelling characters, and craft stories representing their perspectives (Hyland, 2019; Labov & Waletzky, 1997).

As universities increasingly emphasize higher-order thinking skills, narrative writing has become valuable because it allows students to express complex thoughts and emotions (Hyland, 2019; Saaty, 2023, 2025). When composing stories, students generate original ideas, create situations, and devise solutions (Wongsasawat & Waewchimplee, 2025), that engage critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Consequently, it empowers students to take ownership of their linguistic skills and self-expression (Labov & Waletzky, 1997).

Integrating narrative writing tasks into EFL classrooms improves students' grammatical accuracy, vocabulary use, coherence, and motivation while fostering meaningful communication and intercultural reflection (Asri et al., 2022; Saaty, 2023, 2025). However, despite the increasing research on narrative writing in EFL contexts, its implementation in intensive university-level English programs, together with the associated linguistic development and learners' emotional and creative engagement, has not been adequately examined through mixed-method studies. Moreover, research that systematically analyzes students' fictional and nonfictional narratives to explore how narrative writing supports identity construction, learner agency, and meaningful literacy practices is limited. Therefore, this study examines the use of personal narrative writing in university-level EFL classes and proposes a pedagogical writing intervention to evaluate its implications for language teaching and learning. The main objective of this study was to explore the narrative writing experiences and perceptions of Saudi female university students. Consequently, the research questions were as follows:

RQ1: What themes emerge in the fictional and nonfictional written narratives of Saudi female university students?

RQ2: How do Saudi female university students perceive their experience of writing fictional and nonfictional narratives?

RQ3: What are the emotional responses of Saudi female university students to their experience of writing fictional and nonfictional narratives?

Literature Review

Creative Writing and English Language Learning

The development of writing skills requires sustained engagement, exposure to authentic everyday language, and opportunities to practice various genres, such as narrative, descriptive, expressive, and argumentative writing (Hameed, 2021). This helps learners understand written language and construct coherent sentences and paragraphs.

Integrating creative learning strategies into language education fosters innovation, stimulates student interest, and promotes autonomous knowledge acquisition (Masie et al., 2018; Saaty, 2025). It allows learners to imagine and produce original content, actively engage, and derive enjoyment from authentic, meaningful work (Göçen, 2019). Educators must integrate innovative approaches into their classrooms to help learners develop academically relevant and meaningful writing skills and transfer them to real-life contexts (Saaty, 2023, 2025). Specifically, the integration of creative writing into language instruction promotes grammar, vocabulary, and discourse development (Suwartini et al., 2022), and encourages learners to experiment innovatively with language (Kırkgöz, 2014).

Creative Writing and Saudi Vision 2030

Saudi Vision 2030 aims to transform Saudi Arabia's oil-dependent economy into a diversified and globally integrated economy that requires reforming the education system to cultivate skills for national and societal development. The vision states, "We will prepare a modern curriculum focused on rigorous standards in literacy, numeracy, skills, and character development. We will track progress and publish a sophisticated range of education outcomes, showing year-on-year improvements" (Saudi Vision 2030, n.d.).

To meet this goal, fostering 21st-century core skills, particularly creative thinking, is essential, as these skills contribute significantly to societal advancement (Alsaadi et al., 2025). Therefore, university students must acquire these skills to meet local and global job market demands (Abdullateef et al., 2023). Furthermore, mastery of a foreign language encourages creative thinking by reconfiguring existing ideas, surfacing latent thoughts, and enabling learners to apply knowledge coherently and purposefully (Al-Mwzaiji & Muhammad, 2023; Ismail & Mohamed Kassem, 2022; Saaty, 2025).

Exploring EFL Narrative Writing

Although writing is a foundational skill, EFL learners may struggle with coherence, fluency, and self-expression (Hyland, 2003). Personal narrative writing helps learners organize their ideas, identify their voices, and improve grammatical accuracy (Hanauer, 2012, 2015; Saaty, 2019, 2023, 2025; Zamel, 1982). This process is open-ended, imaginative, and grounded in self-expression. Moreover, narrative writing helps develop key skills, such as employing multiple tenses, chronologically sequencing content, and conveying emotions and personal experiences (Kaplan & Grabe, 2002). This makes the writing process meaningful and engaging, fosters a stronger sense of purpose and motivation, and supports deeper linguistic and cognitive development (Bruner, 1991; Grabe & Kaplan, 2014).

Writing personal narratives enables learners to connect linguistic knowledge with real-life experiences (Hanauer, 2012; Saaty, 2019, 2023, 2025). Therefore, educators must foster meaningful learning environments (Saaty, 2019, 2023; Wan et al., 2014). Analyzing short stories written by EFL learners provides valuable insights into their language use, cultural perspectives,

authorial voices, and identity formation (Garvin, 2013; Hanauer, 2015; Maloney, 2022). Hence, this study synthesizes research on applied linguistics and language pedagogy to examine how student-generated narratives function as meaningful artifacts in language learning and personal development.

Theoretical Foundation

Personal Narrative Writing through Sociocultural and Meaningful Literacy Learning Theories in EFL

This study draws on two theoretical perspectives: sociocultural learning theory and meaningful literacy learning theory. The former emphasizes the importance of engaging learners in activities that help them make sense of the world. Writing personal narratives in EFL classrooms allows learners to construct meaning through language, which is crucial for helping individuals interpret their experiences and social environments (Vygotsky, 1978).

The latter is an EFL approach that emphasizes the importance of personal relevance in the language learning process. Learning is framed as relevant and personally significant, helping learners understand and interpret their world (Hanauer, 2012). As Hanauer (2012) explained, "human beings are characterized by their ability to make sense of themselves and their surroundings" (p. 107). Personal narrative writing aligns with this approach by centering learners on their educational experiences and providing them with a platform to share life experiences, foster connections and reflections, and integrate personal histories, identities, and aspirations (Nicholes, 2022; Saaty, 2019, 2023, 2025).

Study Significance

This study contributes to the field of English language pedagogy by supporting English language educators and researchers in developing strategies and methods for improving learners' writing skills. These methods can be applied in contexts where English is taught as a second or foreign language. The study positions the English curriculum at the heart of the University of Jeddah's commitment to developing learners' knowledge-based thinking skills and competencies to bridge the gap between education and the labor market. Its findings could help universities across Saudi Arabia align their educational strategies with the objectives of Vision 2030 by providing insights into learners' mastery of creative writing.

Methodology

Research Design and Approach

This mixed-methods study adopted qualitative analytical techniques, supplemented by descriptive statistical analysis in the form of frequency counts for the identified themes. The qualitative dimension focuses on an in-depth analysis of students' written narratives to explore patterns in language use, thematic development, and overall writing performance. The quantitative component supported this analysis by providing numerical representations of the recurring themes and features, thereby strengthening the interpretive findings and offering a more comprehensive understanding of the data.

Participants and Sampling

The participants were 30 first-year Saudi female students (aged 18–20) enrolled in a science track at a public university in Saudi Arabia. They were purposively selected based on the

following specific criteria: foundational English writing skills, limited prior experience in narrative writing (to better isolate the effects of the intervention), and voluntary participation with informed consent. The sample included the entire class taught by the researcher, with all the students volunteering to participate, thereby reflecting the natural classroom context in which the narrative writing task was conducted. All participants were female because the university operates gender-segregated campuses, and the study was conducted on women's campuses. The students used *Life*, an intermediate-level EFL textbook published by National Geographic Learning and adopted by the university. Participants were classified as intermediate-level English learners, corresponding to the B1–B2 levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The researcher taught the students throughout the academic semester during which the study was conducted.

Data Collection

First, a narrative-writing task elicited written stories from students, providing direct evidence of their storytelling themes, tone, and structure. Second, a set of task-completion questions was administered to explore participants' reflections on the writing process. Both were submitted electronically via a Blackboard Discussion Board to ensure a consistent and accessible platform for data collection.

Narrative Writing Task

To address RQ1, students were asked to write their personal narratives. Unit six of the *Life* textbook (Intermediate Level) by National Geographic Learning inspired the short-story writing task. Students were given 15 minutes to write an engaging short story, either fiction or nonfiction, with no word limits. They were free to write sentences or paragraphs and choose their preferred mode of composition: typing on smartphones, tablets, or laptops or writing by hand. All the students chose to type their stories using the Notes application on their smartphones. The task instructions were as follows:

- "Work independently."
- "There is no word limit; compose an interesting fictional or nonfictional short story."
- "After completing the task, read your stories aloud and share them on the Blackboard Discussion Board."

Task Completion Questions

To address RQ2 and RQ3, participants responded to two open-ended questions after completing the narrative writing task: "How was the experience of writing a short story? Why?" and "How did you feel when you wrote your short story?" These questions capture the process-oriented and emotion-focused aspects of the task.

Data Analysis

A total of 30 short stories (24 nonfictional and six fictional) written by Saudi female university students were analyzed. Samples of student narratives and reflections were transcribed verbatim. All typographical and grammatical errors in the original text were preserved to maintain the authenticity and integrity of the participants' written work. This approach preserves data reliability and allows readers to observe the students' genuine language use.

Both narrative outputs and students' responses to the task-completion questions were analyzed using content and thematic analyses. Thematic analysis was applied to personal narratives and reflective responses to identify and interpret recurring themes, while content analysis was applied to both fictional and nonfictional narratives to examine patterns in the data and provide a quantitative and qualitative assessment of students' writing practices. The frequencies and percentages of the identified themes were calculated to corroborate the thematic findings and to offer a complementary quantitative dimension for the analysis.

The analytical process entailed systematic coding, categorization, and development of general themes. NVivo was selected for its ability to handle large qualitative datasets and generate visual representations of coding structures and thematic patterns; it was used to manage, code, and visualize the data efficiently. To ensure the reliability of the coding process, inter-rater reliability was established through independent coding by a second researcher, followed by a comparison and discussion of discrepancies until an agreement was reached. Furthermore, the data analysis continued until thematic saturation was achieved, as evidenced by the absence of new themes emerging from successive rounds of coding and review.

Results

RQ1: Themes in Fictional and Nonfictional Narratives

Thematic Analysis of Fictional Personal Narratives

Analysis of the six fictional personal narratives identified the following key themes (Table 1):

Table 1. *Themes and frequencies*

Theme	Frequency	% of Total
Absurd/Satirical Events	3	50%
Fantasy/Horror Elements	2	33%
Magical Realism/Animated Objects	1	17%
Surreal Contrast with Normal Life	2	33%

Note. Some stories fit into more than one category; thus, the percentage exceeded 100%.

Thematic Exploration

Absurd/Satirical Events (three stories). The three fictional personal narratives employed deliberate exaggeration or irony to create humor. One narrative described a celebrity asking for a selfie with her at Starbucks: "She asked me if she can take a selfie with me…so she took my number and went to her car dancing." Another student wrote, "I saw a crocodile giving the kids gifts, so I stand in the line to get one." Yet another student wrote, "I found a big dead flamingo…but I was worried about my physics exam, so I just left it."

Fantasy/Horror Elements (two stories). These two narratives incorporated fantasy and horror themes. The first described a haunted setting: "We entered the terror house and saw a zombie eating the people…" The second narrative incorporated a futuristic fantasy setting: "I read the news…and saw the cars flying already." These narratives blended imagination with fear or awe.

Magical Realism/Animated Objects (one story). Only one narrative concerned magical realism and animated objects. This narrative reflects a classic magical realism trope in which an everyday object unexpectedly becomes animated. The student wrote, "I was drawing a picture and suddenly the picture start talking to me…"

Surreal Juxtaposition (two stories). These two narratives incorporate surreal events alongside normal reactions, creating a dry sense of humor. One student wrote, "I just left it and

went inside," describing her decision to ignore the dead flamingo during an exam. Another example is "I stand in the line to get one," which illustrates a character casually lining up behind the children to receive gifts from a crocodile.

Figure 1 presents the number of stories per theme across six fictional narratives. Absurd/satirical events dominated, followed by fantasy/horror and surreal-normal contrasts, while magical realism featured in only one story.

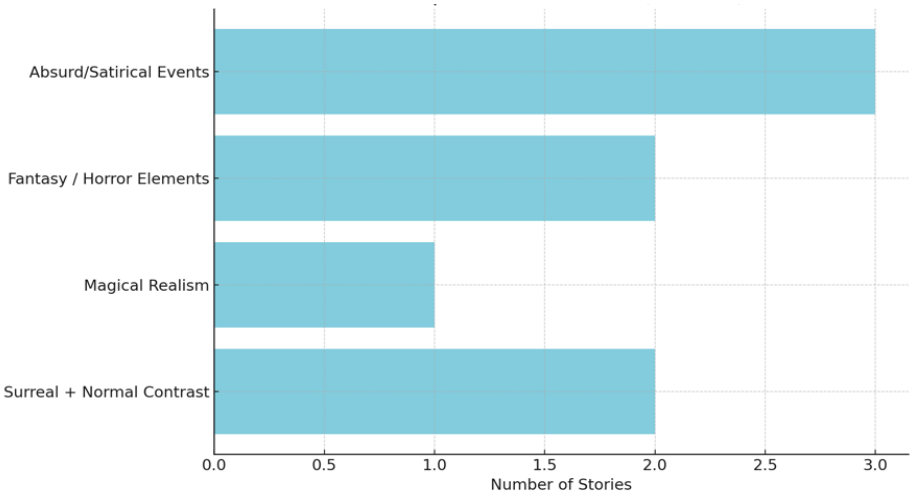


Figure 1. Number of fictional narratives per theme

Figure 2 shows the percentages of fictional narratives for each theme. Absurd and satirical events dominated at 50%, indicating a strong preference for humor and exaggeration. Fantasy/horror and surreal contrasts appeared in 33% of the stories, often introducing tension or irony. Magical realism appeared in 17% of the narratives, bringing unreal elements into everyday contexts.

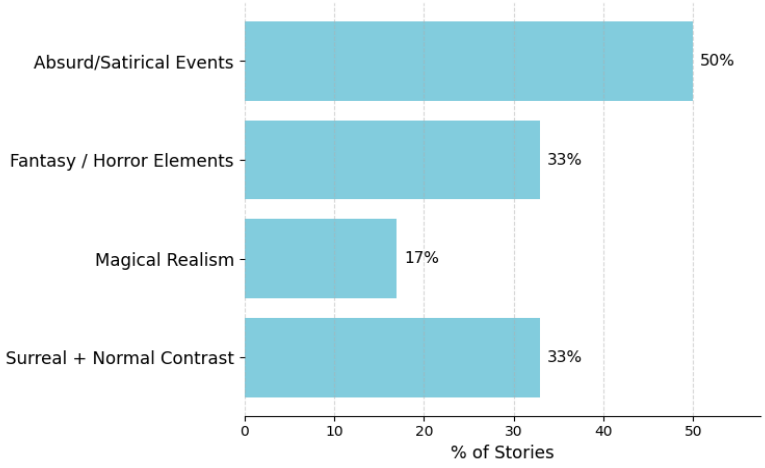


Figure 2. Theme distribution for fictional narratives

Thematic Analysis of Nonfictional Personal Narratives

Analysis of the 24 nonfictional personal narratives identified several key themes (Table 2).

Table 2. *Themes in nonfictional narratives*

Theme	Frequency	% of Total
Celebrations (birthdays, parties)	5	21%
Family/friend trips (domestic)	9	38%
Travel (international/spiritual)	3	13%
Leisure activities (shopping, movies)	5	21%
Personal growth/reflection	2	8%
Unexpected events/problems/fear	4	17%
Sadness/regret/emotional conflict	2	8%

Note. Some stories reflected multiple themes; thus, the percentages exceeded 100%.

Thematic Exploration

Celebrations (five stories). Five narratives concerned celebrations such as birthdays and social gatherings. Additionally, the participants commonly reported positive emotions such as joy, gratitude, and surprise. For instance, one student described preparing a surprise birthday cake for her sister: "Reta loved the cake and said she's grateful for the effort I made for her." Another student recounted attending a themed costume party with friends: "I went to my friend's birthday party and it was really interesting because we all wore red costumes."

Family/Friend Trips (nine stories). Nine narratives concerned trips with family and/or friends, ranging from local outings (in Taif, Makkah, and Abha) to spontaneous picnics and camps. Descriptions often included bonding, nature, and fun, although some narratives reported fear (e.g., monkeys). Narratives recounted a shopping trip that included wildlife encounters or a beach day with rain: "We grabbed our camping gear…we saw tigers and falcons…it was a scary trip indeed."

International/Spiritual Travel (three stories). Three narratives reflected travel experiences, including Umrah, trips to the United States, and reflections on spiritual journeys, highlighting cultural, emotional, and religious values. One student wrote about an international trip with her family: "This summer I traveled to America with my family and we saw the Statue of Liberty."

Leisure Activities (five stories). Five narratives concerned leisure activities, such as going to the cinema, cooking with friends, or shopping. In these narratives, students focused on the enjoyment of everyday life and its social aspects. One student wrote: "We also got popcorn and, nachos and some drinks. It was good, and the movie was impressive."

Personal Growth/Reflection (two stories). Both narratives reflected personal growth. These included stories about the formation of new habits, self-discovery, or health. These narratives were reflective and motivational in tone. One student expressed: "I found myself in these things…aerial yoga made me feel like I'm flying."

Unexpected Events/Challenges (four stories). Four narratives reflected unexpected events and challenges, such as fear of animals, sudden weather changes, or accidents. Students' narratives blended humor and anxiety, creating dramatic arcs. One student wrote, "A tribe of monkeys…managed to scare me and my sister and steal all our food."

Sadness/Regret (two stories). Both narratives reflected sadness and regret. They described missed opportunities and mistakes. The tone was predominantly somber, concluding with unresolved disappointment. One student wrote, "I had forgotten my personal identity…I arrived and could not take the test."

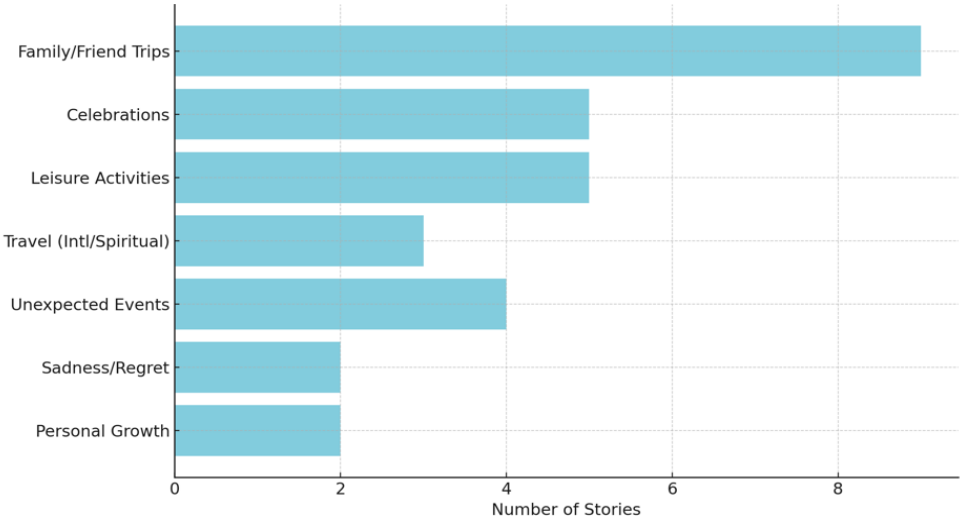


Figure 3. Number of nonfictional narratives per theme

Figure 3 depicts the number of stories by theme across the 24 nonfiction personal narratives, and Figure 4 illustrates their proportional distribution. Although themes such as unexpected events, sadness/regret, and personal growth appeared less frequently, they also contributed to emotional and narrative depth.

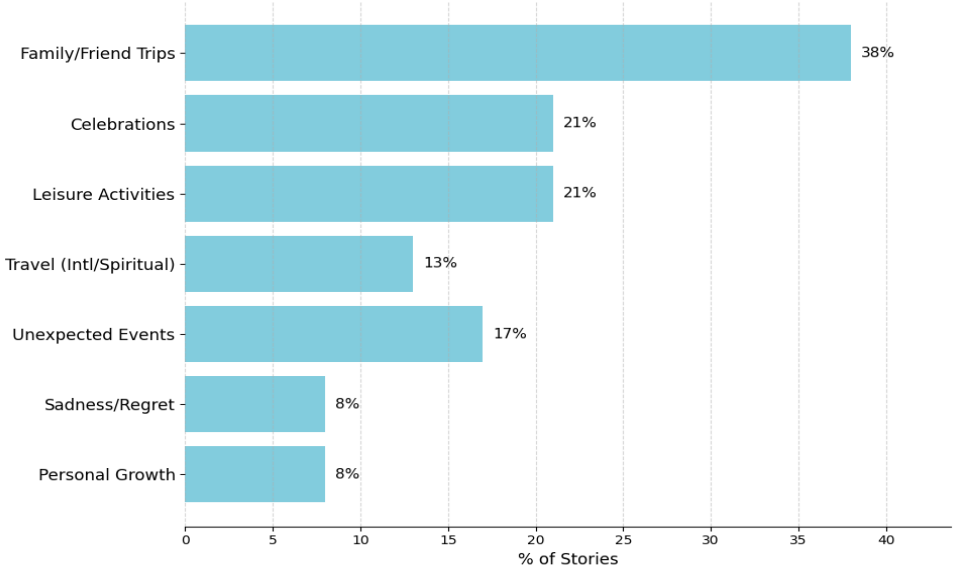


Figure 4. Theme distribution for nonfictional narratives

RQ2: Students' Perceptions of the Writing Experience

Fictional Narratives

First Reflection Question: Task Experience. Six responses were analyzed, with each student providing a brief description of their experience of writing a fictional narrative and the

reasons behind their emotions or attitudes. Tables 3 and 4 present the primary emotional tone categories and the common reasons for these emotions, respectively.

Table 3. *Emotional tone distribution*

Emotional Tone	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Positive	6	100%
Neutral/Mixed/Negative	0	0%

Table 4. *Commonly cited reasons*

Reason/Theme	**Frequency**
Fun/Enjoyable experience	6
Creative outlet/freedom	3
Inspired by media or imagination	2
Lack of anxiety about correctness	1
Interest in the subject	1

Note: A qualitative reading then clarified these categories and distribution.

Fun and Positive Tone across all Responses. All the students used descriptors, such as "fun," "cool," "enjoyable," and "interesting," in their answers. One student wrote, "Fun and interesting. I felt happy and wanted to share it…" Another student said, "Cool and Fun," while a third stated, "Enjoyable. I am not worried about mistakes in writing."

Creativity and Imagination Enjoyment. Several students enjoyed and valued the creative freedom of fictional writing. One student said, "Fun and creative story," and another explained, "Fun—I got the idea from a movie." Notably, the students reported finding inspiration in external media (e.g., movies) and their imagination (e.g., animals such as flamingos), which gave them greater freedom in developing their stories. Students also expressed joy in the creative elements of fictional narrative writing. Two students reflected on their experiences. One wrote, "I felt interested to write an unreal story because I used my mind to imagine new things," while another stated, "I felt really excited when I wrote it because I love planning new experiences."

Confidence Without Pressure. One student mentioned that fiction allowed her to write freely. She remarked, "Enjoyable. I am not worried about mistakes in writing."

Nonfictional Narratives

First Reflection Question: Task Experience. A total of 24 student reflections were analyzed, with each student providing a brief description of their writing experience and the reasons for their reported emotions or attitudes. Responses were formatted into words, phrases, and short sentences. Table 5 presents the primary emotional tone categories derived from these responses.

Table 5. *Emotional tone distribution*

Emotion/Attitude	Frequency	Percentage
Positive (Fun, Nice, Great, Happy, Lucky)	17	68%
Neutral (Easy, Normal)	16	64%
Negative (Not bad/tried)	2	8%
Reflective/Lesson learned	1	4%

Note. Some stories fit into more than one category; thus, the percentage exceeded 100%.

Most responses reflected positive attitudes (e.g., fun and nice), with 17 mentions. Additionally, several responses expressed neutral attitudes (e.g., easy and normal), with 16

mentions, similar to the positive frequency. However, negative attitudes (e.g., not bad or tried) were reported only twice. Furthermore, only one response had a reflective attitude, describing the experience as a "lesson learned." Notably, some responses expressed multiple tones (e.g., fun and easy) and appeared in more than one category.

During the follow-up period, the participants were asked to explain their attitudes. However, not all the students provided elaborate responses to this section. Table 6 presents the participants' responses.

Table 6. *Commonly cited reasons for the experience*

Reason/Theme	Frequency
Based on real-life events or personal memory	14
Easy due to familiarity/language comfort	12
Enjoyed the process (fun/happiness)	11
Previously practiced writing (school experience)	3
Lesson or reflection involved	1

The emotional tone categories and their distribution were then examined qualitatively.

Ease and Familiarity with Content. Several students reported that they found the task easy because the story was based on real experiences, which made it easier to recall and write. One student wrote, "It was easy to write because I know all these words and it's just happened." Moreover, they were accustomed to writing stories in Arabic or had previous experience with story writing. Another student wrote, "It was easy because I used to write short stories in school in Arabic." Students expressed satisfaction, particularly when writing about meaningful experiences, and engaged with them confidently.

Positive Emotional Engagement. Students often described the experience as "fun," "nice," or "great." One student commented, "It was fun because I remember the moment." Another student wrote, "It was so easy and fun. I already learned how to write a short story before." Students expressed positive reactions, especially when writing about meaningful experiences with confident emotional engagement.

Sense of Reflection or Insight. Only one student described writing as a reflective activity: "I remember the story. I never can forget it. Lesson learned."

Low Engagement/Modest Effort. A small number of respondents were less enthusiastic. One student wrote, "It wasn't bad, I tried to do my best at writing," while another commented, "Not bad."

RQ3: Students' Emotional Responses

Fictional Narratives

Second Reflection Question: Self-emotion. Tables 7 and 8 present the emotional tone categories and the common reasons for these emotions.

Table 7. *Emotional tone distribution*

Emotional Tone	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Positive	6	100%
Neutral	0	0%
Mixed/Negative	0	0%

Table 8. *Cited reasons for emotional response*

Theme/Reason	**Frequency**
Creativity/Imagination	2
Happiness/Enjoyment	5
Ease/Comfort with the Task	2
Pride in Accomplishment (e.g., short form)	1
Preference for academic writing	1

Creative Empowerment. Several students reported feeling empowered through their creativity and imagination. One student explained, "I felt wonderful that I come up with this creative imaginative story." Another wrote, "I felt happy and excited to write a creative, imaginative story."

Happiness and Fun. Positive feelings, such as happiness, excitement, and fun, dominated. One student wrote, "Easy and fun and happy," while another said, "I felt great! I love it so much."

Simplicity and Non-Academic Freedom. Some students appreciated fiction writing as easy and non-academic. One student stated, "I felt nice to write an easy story not academic writing." Another student expressed her happiness about the freedom to write simple, non-academic content: "I felt happy that I can write a story in 1 sentence."

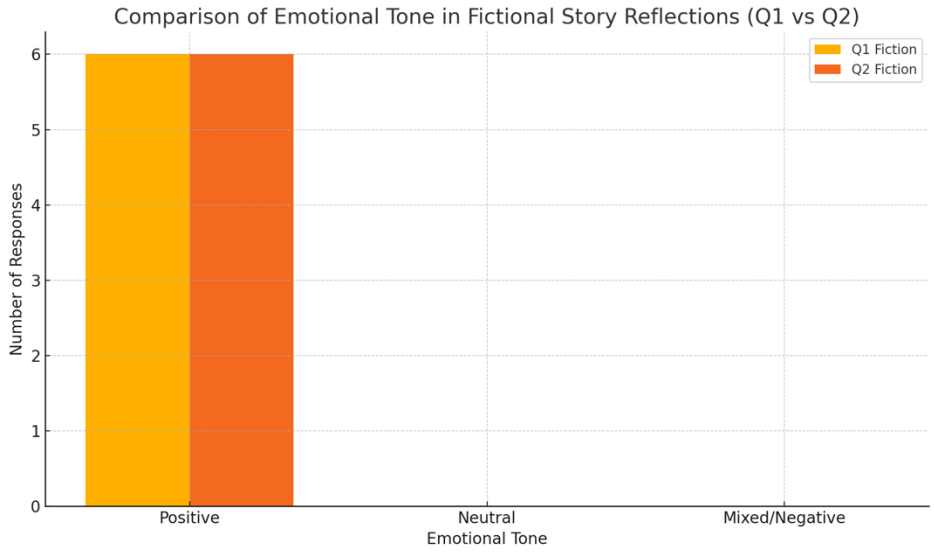


Figure 5. Comparison of emotional tone in fictional narratives reflections (Q1 vs. Q2)

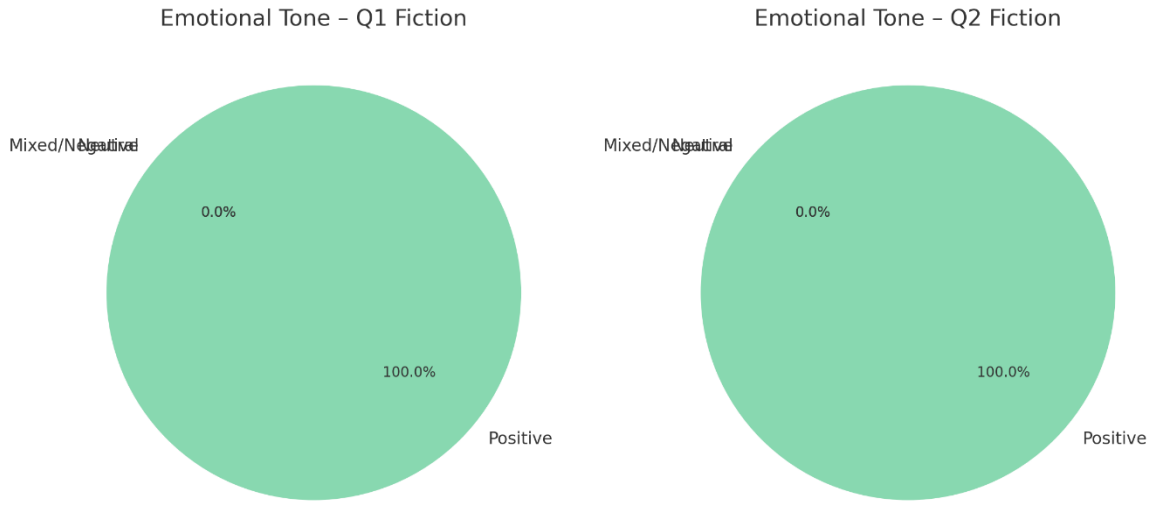


Figure 6. Emotional tone distribution for student reflections on fictional narratives

Q1: How was the experience? All students (100%) described their experiences as fun, creative, enjoyable, or inspiring (positive).

Q2: How did you feel? All students (100%) reported feeling happy, proud, relaxed, and creatively satisfied when writing fictional stories (positive).

Nonfictional Narratives

Second Reflection Question: Self-emotion. Most responses (Table 9) reflected a positive tone (e.g., happy and fun), with 18 mentions. In contrast, only one response was neutral (nothing special). The three responses reflected mixed emotions (happy and afraid). However, a negative tone (sad or painful memory) was observed in two responses.

Table 9. *Emotional tone distribution*

Emotional Tone	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Positive (Happy, Fun, Excited, Grateful, Lucky)	18	75%
Neutral (Nothing special)	1	4%
Mixed Emotions (Happy & Scared, Emotional Blend)	3	13%
Negative (Sad, Painful memory)	2	8%

Note. Some responses expressed more than one tone; thus, the total score exceeded 100%.

To analyze the data in depth, qualitative analysis was employed to clarify the emotional tone categories and distribution.

Positive Emotional Connection. When writing their stories, most students described positive feelings linked to personal memories, such as happiness, excitement, gratitude, and enjoyment. For instance, one student wrote, "I felt happy when I wrote." Another wrote, "I felt good and grateful to have my sister and happy to remember this wonderful moment again." Several responses reflected deep emotional connections and nostalgia. One response stated, "I felt so happy and wished we could relive those moments." Another response was particularly intense: "I felt like a mountain of memories just fell down on my brain."

Mixed or complex emotions. Some reflections revealed the emotional complexity. One student wrote, "I felt a mix of emotions," another commented, "I felt a mix of emotions—scared

at the moment and fun and scary when I wrote it," and a third stated, "Mixed emotions. Unforgettable sad story."

Negative/Painful Emotions. Two students noted that writing helped bring difficult yet important feelings to the surface. One student stated, "Sad because I remembered the pain." Another student described her narrative as an "unforgettable sad story."

Low Emotional Engagement. One student reported, "I felt nothing while writing it, probably because it's a normal story."

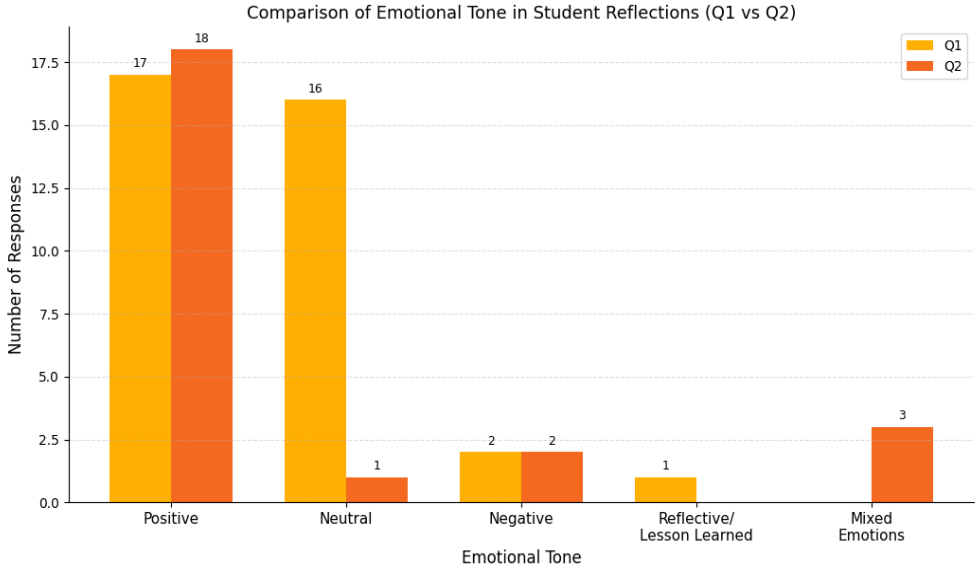


Figure 7. Comparison of emotional tone in student reflections (Q1 vs. Q2)

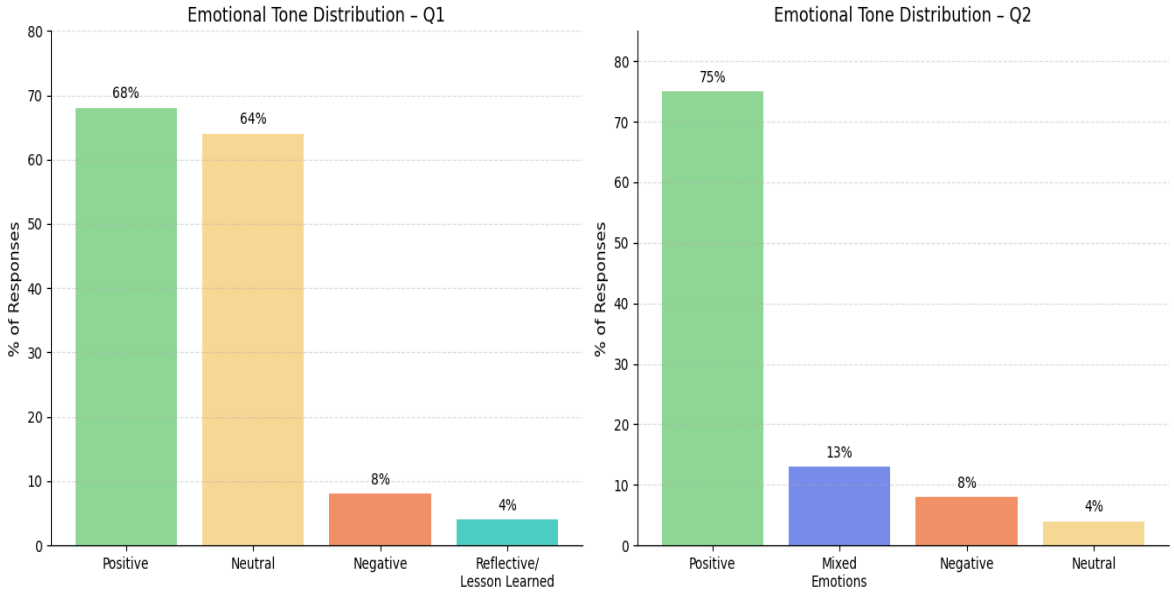


Figure 8. Emotional tone distribution (Q1 & Q2)

Figure 8 provides individual bar charts for each question, offering a thematic breakdown of the emotional tone distributions.

Q1: How was the experience of writing a short story?

- Positive and neutral tones dominated (several participants reported that the task was easy to perform).
- No mixed emotions were expressed.
- Very few negative responses.
- A single reflective response (4%) noted a lesson learned.

Q2: How did you feel when you wrote your short story?

- Positive emotions remained high.
- Fewer neutral responses.
- Mixed emotions emerged, indicating a greater emotional depth when students reflected specifically on their feelings.

Framing a question (task experience vs. emotional reflection) can reveal the different layers of student engagement. Thematic analysis of the Q1 and Q2 reflections (Figure 9) identified several recurring themes in students' narratives. The most prominent theme was that the stories were based on real-life experiences (36.8%), with students drawing from personal or autobiographical events, which made the writing process easier and more meaningful.

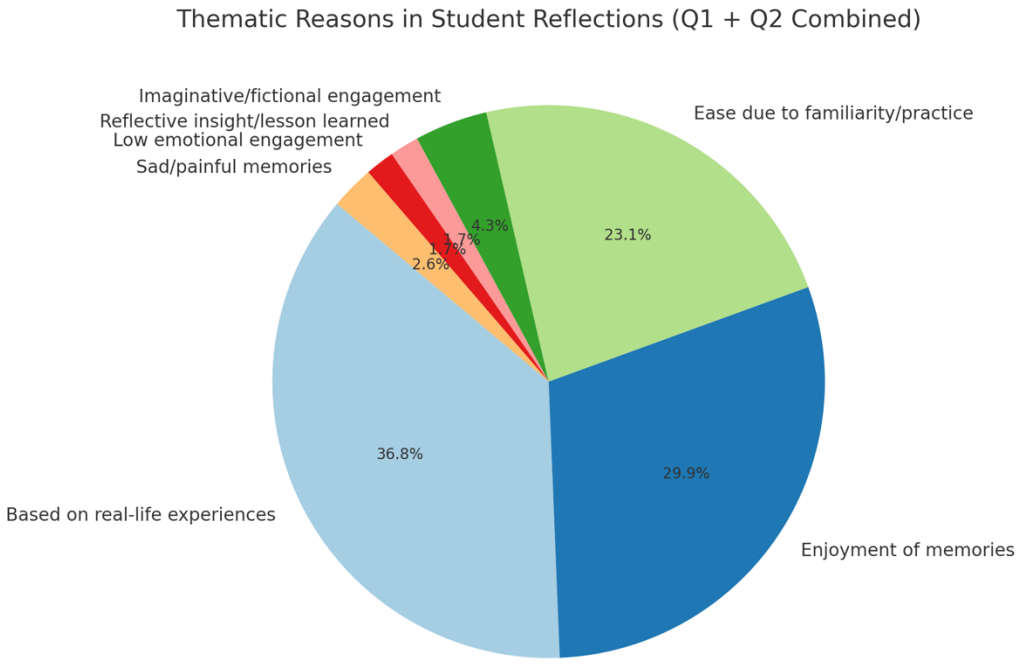


Figure 9. Thematic reasons in students' reflections (Q1+Q2 Combined)

Many students reported enjoyment, often expressing joy and nostalgia, when revisiting positive experiences. Another frequent theme was ease arising from familiarity or prior practice, with several students noting that the task was manageable because they were accustomed to writing similar stories or were familiar with the events described. However, a smaller group engaged in imaginative fictional storytelling theme.

Discussion

Themes such as family, celebrations, travel, leisure activities, and personal growth emerged consistently across the stories. Although many of these experiences were associated with positive emotions such as joy, excitement, and connection, the presence of sadness, fear, and regret in some narratives indicates that personal storytelling also provided opportunities for students to represent and interpret their lived experiences. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which posits that learning and cognitive development are inherently shaped by social interactions, cultural contexts, and language use.

Through storytelling, students draw upon shared cultural routines, familial traditions, and community-based knowledge, which are cultural tools that mediate higher-order thinking. Writing about real events enables students to internalize and reframe experiences, using narratives to interpret joyful and challenging moments. Engagement with personal history allows students to operate within their zones of proximal development (ZPD), especially when they receive guidance, feedback, or inspiration from their peers or teachers in the classroom. According to Vygotsky (1978), the full realization of ZPD is contingent on social interactions.

From the perspective of meaningful literacy learning, these stories are valuable because they are authentic, emotionally resonant, and personally significant. When students write about a trip, birthday surprise, or missed exam, they actively construct meaning from lived experiences, transforming memories into narratives. This act of construction implies the intentional cognitive work involved in writing, emphasizing the agency in literacy, signal variability, and personal specificity across multiple contexts. This writing indicates a deep, reflective literacy that connects individuals to the social world (Hanauer, 2012; Saaty, 2015, 2019). Nonfiction stories demonstrate that when literacy tasks are rooted in real-world, culturally relevant experiences, students engage fully, express themselves authentically, and learn meaningfully.

Hanauer (2012) characterizes human beings by their ability to make sense of themselves and their surroundings, which reflects how students drew on their lived experiences to construct meaning. The practice of writing nonfictional narratives corresponds to the principles of meaningful literacy learning, making the language-learning process more personally meaningful, and enabling learners to comprehend and interpret their social and cultural contexts (Hanauer, 2012).

The students' fictional narratives revealed a strong tendency toward absurd and humorous storytelling interwoven with social and personal satire. These stories use absurdity to critique everyday behavior or satirize social norms. They served as creative expressions and tools for exploring social norms, emotional reactions, and cultural absurdities, a process aligned with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. Through fictional storytelling, students develop linguistic skills, engage with their cultural environment, and interpret and reshape it through imagination, irony, and emotional nuances. When students invented exaggerated or surreal events, they drew upon shared cultural references and reframed them within their ZPD, extending their thinking through prior knowledge, classroom interactions, and peer influence (Hanauer, 2012; Saaty, 2015, 2019).

Meaningful literacy learning theory emphasizes that literacy becomes powerful when personally and socially relevant (Hanauer, 2012). Students' use of satire, fantasy, tragedy, and magical realism illustrated how writing became meaningful when they connected it to their lives, interests, and social world. These fictional texts were authentic acts of identity construction, humor, and emotional engagement, demonstrating that the students thrived when they were

permitted to explore imaginatively. Moreover, their experimentation with tone, logic, and the unexpected suggests that they were constructing knowledge and expressing it creatively, which aligned with Vygotsky's pedagogy and the principles of meaningful literacy development.

The analysis of the students' responses revealed that the overall emotional tone was overwhelmingly positive, with students frequently describing the writing experience as fun, easy, or enjoyable. This suggested a general sense of comfort and engagement with the task. The narratives were primarily autobiographical as students preferred to draw from real-life experiences, making their writing accessible and personally meaningful.

Most students reported that they found the task relatively easy, citing their familiarity with the topic or prior practice of similar writing activities. Additionally, the narratives carried significant emotional value as students expressed satisfaction, nostalgia, and a sense of connection, particularly when recounting meaningful or memorable experiences. Although most responses focused on recounting events, some demonstrated creative or reflective depth, indicating that students used the task as an opportunity for introspection or imaginative engagement.

The findings indicated that most students experienced positive emotions when writing nonfiction stories. Several participants described their feelings of happiness, enjoyment, and satisfaction when drawing on their personal memories. For them, writing reportedly serves as a tool for emotional reflection, allowing them to reconnect with meaningful life experiences. However, a minority expressed mixed or painful emotions, suggesting that storytelling has both therapeutic and cathartic dimensions. These emotionally complex narratives illustrate how personal writing can help students process challenging experiences in supportive academic contexts.

A few students demonstrated reflective insights or reported learning a lesson, suggesting a deeper personal interpretation. Meanwhile, low emotional engagement appeared in a few responses in which students treated the task as routine or unremarkable. Sad or painful memories were evident in some narratives, illustrating how storytelling serves as an outlet for processing difficult experiences. The emotional tone analysis of students' reflections on Q1 and Q2 revealed a consistently positive experience across all responses (Figure 5). This uniformity suggests that fictional writing was perceived as an emotionally safe and enjoyable activity that enabled students to express themselves freely and engage in the task in a lighthearted and imaginative manner. These themes suggest that personal narrative writing supports language development and fosters emotional expression, memory recall, and self-awareness.

Several students drew inspiration from their personal interests or media influences, indicating that fiction provides space for playful exploration of ideas. Compared to nonfictional personal narratives, the fictional stories did not contain sadness, mixed emotions, or introspective reflection, positioning them as a safe, joyful space for expression. Across all the responses, students reported feeling consistently positive while writing, and many identified creativity and imagination as key sources of joy, pride, and motivation. Hence, fictional storytelling liberates students from academic pressures and enables them to write in a relaxed and expressive manner. Even when writing brief or simple stories, the students expressed a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, highlighting the potential of fictional writing to build confidence and foster enjoyment in language learning.

Conclusion and Implications

The thematic analysis of students' nonfictional and fictional narratives revealed distinct yet complementary patterns in their writing practices. The most common themes in the nonfiction were family or friend trips, celebrations, and leisure activities. These narratives were characterized by positive emotional tones (e.g., joy and fun), although several students used storytelling to process negative or difficult experiences (e.g., sadness and fear). Elements such as animals, weather changes, and timing mishaps introduce tension or surprise, whereas a smaller number of stories reflected an emerging identity and personal growth.

By contrast, fictional narratives were dominated by absurd and humorous storytelling, often featuring social or personal satire. These stories demonstrated creative risk-taking, with students using fantasy, humor, surrealism, and magical realism to stretch the boundaries between logic and reality. Across both genres, the students exhibited a willingness to explore emotions, culture, and imagination, suggesting that storytelling provides a meaningful space for language use, identity exploration, and creative expression. These findings highlight the importance of narrative writing in fostering authentic engagement, emotional depth, and sociocultural connections in language learning.

The analysis of students' fictional and nonfictional narratives provides valuable pedagogical insights for English language teachers and classroom practice. Educators can gain a deeper understanding of students' interests, cultural backgrounds, and emotional landscapes by examining their writing. The recurring themes reveal topics that students are familiar with and intrinsically motivated to explore, linking the act of writing to deeper cognitive and reflective processes and enabling teachers to craft writing prompts that are culturally relevant and personally engaging.

Integrating narrative writing into EFL contexts encourages creative and reflective language use and provides students with opportunities to develop fluency and originality in English. Narratives that include challenges, surprise, or emotional intensity allow students to explore real-life experiences and articulate them meaningfully in a second language. Through this process, students shape and organize their thoughts into a coherent language, which underscores the skill involved in turning experiences into structured English sentences. Therefore, the storytelling process supports linguistic development while nurturing identity formation and emotional expression, thereby contributing to a holistic language learning experience.

Hence, student-generated narratives in the language classroom can make learning meaningful, relevant, and learner-centered while supporting key language skills and cultural awareness. The findings indicate that integrating narrative writing into EFL classrooms enhances language fluency, personal voices, functional grammar use, and learner engagement by aligning writing tasks with students' interests, identities, and cultural backgrounds. It also facilitates formative assessment through tools, such as writing portfolios, which allow educators to track growth in narrative coherence, lexical range, and grammatical accuracy.

This study offers important insights into the narrative writing experiences of Saudi female university students that emerge from the specific educational and cultural setting that defines the scope of the study. The single-classroom setting allowed for an in-depth exploration of shared experiences within a particular academic and cultural context. The focus on female students reflects the gender-segregated nature of higher education in Saudi Arabia and foregrounds the cultural and linguistic factors that shape their narrative writing practices.

Limitations of the Study

This study had several limitations. First, the participants were all female because public universities in Saudi Arabia operate within a gender-segregated educational system. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to male EFL learners whose experiences, narrative themes, and linguistic practices may differ. Second, the sample size was limited to 30 narratives corresponding to the number of students enrolled in the researcher's class. Although in-depth qualitative and linguistic analyses provided rich insights, the relatively small sample size restricted the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the imbalance between fictional (n = 6) and nonfictional (n = 24) narratives limited the depth of the comparative analysis between the two genres and may have influenced the weight of thematic findings.

Future Research

Future studies should include male and female participants across multiple institutions to enable comparative analysis and enhance generalizability. Such research could also adopt comparative approaches across different cultural contexts to examine whether similar patterns hold. Because the findings of this study capture students' perspectives at a single point in their academic journey, longitudinal studies could further examine how perceptions of narrative writing evolve across academic years and professional settings. Researchers may also employ experimental designs with larger samples to examine the sustained impact of narrative writing on language development, learner identity, and creative expression in diverse EFL contexts.

Funding: This paper is not funded.
Conflict of interests: The author declare no conflict of interest.
Authenticity: This manuscript is an original research paper.
Artificial Intelligence Statement: AI have been used to refine language and APA style. After using this service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the content.

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