
EFL WRITING STUDENT'S PERCEPTION OF THE EFFECT OF DIARY WRITING

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ABSTRACT: *The use of diary writing as a tool for language practice and learning enhancement in an EFL classroom is the main topic investigated in this paper. The students participating in the study are English major female students at the College of Basic Education, who would graduate to be English teachers in primary schools. 51 students in two "Advanced Writing" classes were asked to write their diaries during the semester. At the end of the semester they were given a questionnaire with 19 statements and 4 open-ended questions. The researchers found that the majority of students enjoyed writing a diary, and believed that their language and writing techniques have improved. They have also reflected pleasant emotional effects such as removing stress, keeping memories and strengthening the student-teacher relationship. The researchers believe that writing a diary is very useful to EFL learners in terms of language learning and enforcing positive energy in the class.*

KEYWORDS: Writing, higher education, diary writing, journal writing, EFL

INTRODUCTION

Writing is a task that involves the connection of many techniques and skills of language. It includes many branches, one of which is diary writing. Despite the fact that authors tried to give an accurate and comprehensive definition for a diary, some authors use the term 'diary' and 'journal' interchangeably (Mahadzir et al. 2007). Others, however, differentiate between 'diary' and 'journal'. If an author intends to use 'diary' and 'journal' to mean the same thing, then this should be stated from the beginning to increase reader awareness and avoid miscomprehension. The CamTESOL Conference on English Language Teaching (2008) described journaling

as an activity in many writing classrooms can best be compared with keeping a diary. It is an informal, largely unplanned way of writing that involves students expressing their reactions and feelings about a topic that the teacher has set or, more often, that the student wishes to write about. Unlike a diary, a journal is intended to be read and responded to by others, usually the teacher. (p. 121)

Although a large part of the literature on diary writing focused on defining diaries and their characteristics, diaries were used in the classroom to accomplish a number of purposes. Indeed, Porter et al. (1990) states that diaries are used in writing courses to investigate the connection between writing and learning. A comprehensive list of the purpose of diary writing is given by Absalom & Leger (2011), for example, diaries can be used by a learner to reflect on his/her learning experience of learning or by a pre-service teacher as a way of reflection on their practice. Also, a learner can use the diary to develop critical skills or analytic strategies. Learners can use the diary as a means to improve their communication skills and develop their creativity. Diaries

can be used to support planning for research and finally, diaries can be used by the teacher to find out whether students understood the concepts in the lesson.

The following paper attempted to investigate the diverse benefits, if any, of diary writing by conducting a study in the English Department in the College of Basic Education in Kuwait. The study investigates the students' perception of their diary writing experience. They were given a chance to reflect on this experience and comment on its advantages and disadvantages.

This paper will start by reviewing literature connected to the issues of writing, and more precisely, diary writing. This would be followed by the research questions and methodology. The analysis of the data obtained from the questionnaire and open-ended questions will be revealed, and followed by a detailed discussion of the findings in light of the literature review. Finally, this paper will be concluded with a brief statement of the findings and recommendation for EFL/ESL teachers worldwide.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is often said that writing is an act of discovery rather than recovery. However, in diary writing the mere act of recovery is a chance for discovery and self-exploration. Diary writing allows us to record what we have in mind: many writers find this kind of writing to be highly satisfying. Because we write diaries for ourselves, we can write whatever we want without worrying about grammar, style or whatever someone else might think of us. While recording our memories, we may sometimes have other motives, like writing to discover ourselves or to explore an idea. But the initial impulse that leads most people to keep a diary is the need to record memories before they become lost beneath the accumulation of experience in the flux of time.

It is important at the onset to define the word "diary" as used in this paper, especially that the boundaries between "diary" and "journal" are often blurred. The difference between both is that diary is a record of everyday events, whereas a journal incorporates reflections and observations (Miller and Webb; 1992, Adams 2001; and Synder and Linquist, 2010). That is, journals are often more personal and more reflective than diaries. However, as Miller and Webb (1992, p. 30) rightly points out this distinction should not be capitalized on as most of the times while recording events we slip in self-exploration and reflection upon their significance and the impact they have on us. That is to say, oftentimes it is very difficult to draw a demarcation line between both. As such, in this paper we use the word "diary" and the word "journal" interchangeably to mean a type of daily record of one's life which includes reflections and self-explorations.

Diary writing has a number of advantages. It has the virtue of making writing an everyday activity, and, hence, it avoids the pressure one might feel when they are compelled to write (White and Amdt, 1991, p. 63). As we write more often, writing becomes more natural and we might overcome the anxiety that accompanies formal writing. According to Hamp and Heasley (2006), diary writing gives learners the opportunity to practice free writing about what they want and whenever they want to. Another advantage is that the writer might explore experience which they might be reluctant to discuss with others, assuming that it is insignificant. Third, according Fulwiler (1982) writing a personal record can stimulate the memory when one decides to do other types of writing. Sometimes a writer might think that there is nothing to write about. Diary writing can often help writers to brainstorm and retrieve ideas which generate topics for further

elaborate writing tasks. In this sense, as Spanventa (2000, p. 168) puts it, diary writing "helps writers develop their creativity."

Studies conducted on the use of diary writing in an EFL classroom emphasize the effectiveness of diary writing by referring to one, or more, of the benefits mentioned above. Barjsteh et. al. (2011) investigated whether incorporating diary writing can improve EFL college students' achievements and attitudes. The sample of the study consisted of forty-four male participants selected from a population of students majoring in mechanical engineering at Petroleum University of Technology in Iran. The results show that diary writing can be useful as a pre-writing activity for a writing classroom but there is not a significant relationship between the application of diary writing and the participants' improvement in grammar (p.144). Voit (2009) came up with similar results. Having analyzed journal entries for three months, Voit concluded that journal writing did not bring about clear improvement in grammar, but it enhanced students' confidence in their writing.

Not only journals, but also web logs proved to be important. Web logs as a kind of online diary to promote writing fluency. In an earlier study, Fellner and Apple (2006) wanted to find out if using blog tasks in an intensive English CALL program would improve students' writing ability. 21 Japanese university students received a blog topic e-mailed by the instructor. Students then spent 20 minutes e-mailing a message and sent it to their class blog. After that students in the class choose some of those messages to comment on. Results of blogs and tasks completed on computer and in class showed students' used more complex vocabulary. Blogs developed students' autonomy and improved their writing fluency knowing that there is no vocabulary or grammar correction.

Building on this research, Arslan (2014) conducted a study that explored the effect of blog-based writing, portfolio writing and feedback on 59 Turkish student teachers' writing skills. Two classes were used, one used blogs and the other portfolios. The researcher used a pre- and post-questionnaire, assessment of participants' essays and the teacher's feedback. Both groups improved their writing skill at the end of the study. Both groups developed positive attitudes towards blog-writing. One student reported improvement in vocabulary choice, sentence structure and ideas. Others reported improvement in coherence and cohesion as well as organization. Teachers' feedback both global and local helped in improving students' writing too.

However, as far as grammar improvement is concerned, Rokni and Seifi (2013) demonstrated that journal writing had positive impact on student's grammar proficiency. In their study, they divided the sample into one control group, which received regular class instruction, and one experimental group which received extensive sessions in journal writing. The result of the study showed that journal writing had a significant positive impact on students' grammar knowledge.

Tuan explored the possibility of EFL learners overcoming writing difficulties by engaging in diary writing. The researcher conducted the study on a sample of 85 students at the Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature of the University of Social Sciences in Vietnam. The sample was divided into two groups, one experimental group and the other control group. The findings of the study "substantiated the benefits of journal writing as an extensive activity to foster learners' writing motivation and enhance their writing skill as well as to build a close bonding between teachers and learners"(pp.86-87). In another study with similar results, Yoshihara (2008) investigated the impact of dialog journal writing and concluded that journal writing is an effective way in building a relationship of trust between the teacher and the student. The results of the study also showed

that the close bond between the teacher and the student motivate the student to explore his/her potentials.

In a qualitative study based on the analysis of Japanese students' journal entries, Asako Takaesu (2012) concludes that journal writing allowed students to deepen their self-awareness, change their attitudes towards writing in English, boost their confidence and enhance their motivation to undertake a more demanding tasks in writing. Furthermore, Takaesu's study emphasized the idea that creating an "environment where students feel unthreatened by overly strict academic writing rules" is crucial in promoting a successful writing process (45). In a similar study which explored the effect of diary writing on language anxiety, Kose (2005) concluded that journal writing positively affected the students' attitudes towards English and motivated them to write.

Research Questions:

- a. Did the students find the process of diary writing interesting?
- b. Did the students find that diary writing has any advantages/disadvantages?
- c. Did the students find that the student-teacher relationship was affected by diary writing?

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in the college of basic education. Two courses of "Advanced Writing" took part in this investigation. The total number of student participants was 51. In the beginning of the semester (fall 2014/2015), the students were asked to write their diary on daily basis. The instructor followed up on the writing process every 10-15 days. The act of presenting a diary was graded; however, the writing techniques were not evaluated. The instructor praised the students who worked hard on their diary, and wrote more details, yet did not comment on the structure, grammar or vocabulary used in writing. The instructor comments were restricted to the effort of writing, and did not cover any language aspects. At the end of the term, the students were asked to fill in a questionnaire. Each student filled in a 19 likert-scaled statement questionnaire, and answered 4 open ended questions.

RESULTS

The Statements

The results, as mentioned previously, are based on two parts of a questionnaire. The first part consists of 19 statements. The overall results of the questionnaire shows an average mean of 2.5, where 3 indicates agreement and 1 indicates disagreement. This reflects the satisfaction of the majority of students with the diary writing experience.

The first statements of the questionnaire emphasize the students' interest in diary writing. The seven statements also show that the majority of students found diary writing interesting, as opposed to 22.1% who do not find it interesting.

Most students reflected their joy in writing about themselves; thus, they found writing a diary enjoyable. The majority of students (64.7%) feel that writing a diary helps them unwind. Many

participating students feel that diary writing can help them avoid gossip (60.8%). Therefore, over 40% of the students stated that those who do not write their diaries are missing out on something important, which is why they would keep writing their diaries. Astonishingly, 43.1% of the students reflected that diary writing has not become an important part of their lives.

The second category of statements addresses the learning element. An average mean of 2.65 reflects high agreement that diary writing has enhanced the learning of most participating students (78.4%). The majority of students stated that their writing has improved since they started writing their diary. The aspect that most students believed diary writing improved was their vocabulary (92.2%). In addition, 78.4% felt that they are able to express themselves better after they started writing their diaries. Many students thought they became better writers; and 54.9% of the participating students started enjoying their writing class because of diary writing.

It appears from the statistics that diary writing has also affected the student-teacher relationship positively ($m=2.6$). More than half the students believed that since they have begun writing a diary, they have connected with their teacher. 70.6% of the students felt that their instructor encouraged them more after diary writing. Furthermore, the majority of students stated that they have understood the teacher's instructions better after the diary writing experience (78.4%). The statistics show that most participating students (90.2%) were stimulated to do better because of the teacher's comments on their diaries. Although the majority of students believe that they could anticipate what the teacher wants and expects after starting their diary writing, 41.2% are not sure they could anticipate the teachers expectations and requests. The relationship between the students and teachers does not only seem to be stronger, but the strength of the relationship helped the students enjoy the writing class more.

The Open-Ended Questions

The purpose of the open-ended questions was to first validate the results obtained from the questionnaire, and second to obtain detailed information in relation to the students' perception of diary writing. The first question inquired about the students' desire to recommend diary writing to friends, and the reasons for their choice. The majority of the participating students (84%) stated that they would recommend diary writing to their friends. The most common reason provided was their belief that diary writing has improved their writing. Some students explained that their language has improved since they started writing a diary. Many students reflected positive psychological impact of diary writing. They found that the process decreased daily stress, kept valuable memories, and increased their confidence in their ability to write. On the other hand, 15.1% of the students stated that they would not recommend diary writing because they did not like writing about themselves, and find the process boring.

However, most participating teachers-to-be believe they would ask their students in the future to write a diary (86.7%). It was found that some students who would not recommend diary writing to friends, would like to give their students a chance to go through the diary writing experience. While 49% revealed their belief that diary writing would improve their students' writing abilities and language use, 28.3% were interested in building a strong students-teacher relationship and helping students feel better about themselves and more confident when expressing themselves.

Students who enjoyed diary writing, enjoyed it most because it is a method of expressing their feelings and unwinding. Some students (8) liked the idea of getting back to their memories most,

and would like to continue writing their diaries. As for the other students, the improvement in their writing abilities and language was what they liked most in diary writing (11 students).

Although the majority of students seemed to enjoy writing a diary, some reflected a few negative points related to their experience. The most common negative issue was choosing the topic to start writing. Hence, 35.3% of the students felt that sometimes they could not think of something to write about. They might feel so bored or tired, that ideas are completely blocked, yet they feel the obligation to write as it is a course requirement. In addition, 23,5% of the students felt that the commitment to writing daily was very hectic since the process is sometimes time consuming.

In the last part, where students were asked to add any further comments, many students reflected the need for flexibility in diary writing. As they were being graded, they did not skip days without writing a diary page, but in some cases when they had exams or piled homework, it was difficult to write on daily bases. Four students believed that although they loved the idea of writing a diary, they wanted it to be secretive; and hence, not presented to the instructor as homework.

DISCUSSION

The focus of this study is on the use of diary writing as a tool for enhancing language learning in an EFL classroom. During one semester, the participants were offered a chance for self-exploration through diary writing. Drawing upon the results gathered from the questionnaires and open-ended questions about our investigation of students' attitudes and beliefs, a number of issues related to diary writing were identified.

Findings across the questionnaire's statements

As all the questionnaire statements were reflecting positive beliefs about diary writing, we assert that such an overall mean average (2.5) reflects a very high level of satisfaction towards utilizing diary writing within the teaching process in the two writing classes.

A closer look into the questionnaire statements has also indicated a number of findings in relation to three major aspects of writing: the students' level of interest in writing, the progress they experienced in their writing level, and the effect of diary writing on teacher-student relationship. The following section will tackle each of the aspects as reflected by our study's findings.

Students' level of interest in writing

Findings in this regard indicate a general high interest in diary writing as claimed by the majority of the study's sample. The students seem to be particularly interested in the act of diary writing for the joy it creates, the distress it initiates, and the gossip it controls. As a result, almost half of the sample find diary writing to be a precious learning strategy that should never be missed. They thought that writing about the events and remembering the details transpired their memories with much comfort and relief (see Lio et.al. 2007). Thus, it was easier for them to focus on writing what they wanted to share with others. As the current literature notes, writing a personal record can stimulate the memory, Fulwiler (1982). They were able to overcome the anxiety that accompanies formal writing which Kose (2005) indicated that journal writing affected the students' attitudes towards English positively and motivated them to write. This method of expressing their feelings and unwinding willingness to write helped the students enjoy relationship with writing classes devotion and not to miss any class. According to Bagheri and Pourgharib (2013), the students' writing performance reflected awareness of self-growth and intrinsic writing motivation. The big bulk of students (64.7%) felt that writing a diary helps them unwind. Despite such a high interest

in diary writing, a huge proportion of our sample (40%) tends to dismiss the essence of diary writing in their lives.

The progress in the students' writing skill

Investigation of the students' responses on how they perceived their writing skill after being assigned to diary writing has also shown an overall agreement on the effect of diary writing as an enhancer to their writing skill. The results of this study reassured Tuan's study (2012) who explored the possibility EFL journal writing as abridge for creative writing and self-expression. The students pointed out that they expressed themselves better after they started writing their diaries, and their language had improved. At a micro level, the students seem to believe that diary writing has improved their use of vocabulary, their ability to express their thoughts, hence, enabling them to become better writers. In the example discussed by Takaesu (2012) which emphasized the idea that creating an "environment where students feel unthreatened by overly strict academic writing rules", this notion seemed to change their attitudes towards writing in English, and boosted their confidence too. This finding agrees with Takaesu who concludes that journal writing allowed students to deepen their self-awareness, change their attitudes towards writing in English, boost their confidence and enhance their motivation to undertake a more demanding tasks in writing. Some of the participants in this study developed their creativity by using dialogues and sometimes inserted verses of poetry and sayings in their writings. It seems they increased self-confidence to the extent that they worked very well on editing their own writing. Unfortunately though, such optimistic claims of the students' progression in writing would never be validated within the scope of the study in hand. It is crucial to press at this point that whether the students' claims are genuine on the matter does not seem to be crucial as we are after raising our students' motivational levels at this stage.

The effect of diary writing on teacher-student relationship

Our exploration of how diary writing has affected the mutual teacher-student relationships has indicated a further positive finding. Once again, the students seem to have claimed building a stronger relationship with their teachers as a result of diary writing. According to Barjesteh et. al. (2011), the self-reflection created an honest relationship between the student and the teacher, especially when writing openly with no restriction, and the teacher accepting the students writing' without any condition or limitation. This teacher-student and the student-teacher relationship built a strong mutual understanding. As noted previously, the relationship between the students and teacher does not only seem to be stronger, but also encouraged some students to comfortably talk to their teacher about their shortcomings in their writing skill and allowed the teacher to judge for what she felt about what they wrote. Such claim seems to have resulted from their teachers' constant encouragement in their feedback towards what they write in each of their assigned diaries, their better understanding of their teachers' instructions, and a stronger stimulation to better future achievement. Nevertheless, the students have also claimed that they still face a difficulty in anticipating their teachers' requirements in the upcoming writing assignments.

Findings across the questionnaire's open-ended questions

Our study has mainly incorporated a number of open-ended questions with the aim of shedding more light on the students' views and beliefs on diary writing, through looking mainly for explanations. When the students were asked about the future possibility of recommending diary writing to their students as part of the assigned work for their writing classes, the vast majority (reaching approximately 85%) seem to agree on utilizing the technique in their writing classes for two main reasons: improved general writing ability and, to a lesser extent, gained positive attitude toward writing. Such gained positive attitude is claimed to be the result of associating diary writing to a decrease in one's daily stress alongside an increase in self-confidence, may be as a result of

building a stronger teacher-student relationship . The finding tends to be in line with previous research in this regard, whereby findings signal a boost in self-confidence and an establishment of a more positive attitude to writing (Asako Takaesu, 2012; Kose, 2005; Yoshihara, 2008). Similarly, the students have also agreed on recommending diary writing to their friends as it will enhance their language and boost their self-confidence. Only a minority of the students (barely reaching 15%) find diary writing an unnecessary language practice as they perceive writing about one's self as inappropriate and boring.

As for the students' joy in diary writing, they seem to find diary writing an interesting experience mainly because it improves their language proficiency. To a less extent, a satisfactory proportion of the students found the practice to be a source of relief, as it provides the writers with the opportunity to express their inner feelings of fear, sadness and happiness. Nevertheless, some students find the practice to be somewhat annoying and time consuming as it is viewed as an extra burden to what they have been expecting in a conventional writing course. The students have further expressed two main concerns about diary writing; firstly, teachers have to be flexible when the students have no time to write in their diary on a daily basis, may be suggesting that they should be given the chance to write when they feel the need to write. Secondly, diary writing is too personal to be presented to a teacher, implying that the practice could have been more beneficial if the writers have been given the chance to keep their diary to themselves. Both concerns seem to imply that the students feel that the practice of diary writing should have considered the students' privacy and convenience.

We therefore conclude that diary writing is definitely perceived as interesting by the majority of future teachers of English in Kuwait. The teaching technique is believed to enhance their English, boost their self-confidence, and work as a psychological reliever. Such a combination would make students love writing, and as a result, write more. The more they write, the better they get in writing in English. An important advantage of assigning diary writing in ESL/EFL learning context is establishing a more solid teacher-student relationship. Such a solid relationship will help the students to better understand their teachers' feedback and instructions. When they do so, they learn how to revise, edit, and provide progressed pieces of writing. Teachers should however, ensure not to burden their students with the work of diary writing when they are already loaded with huge amount of school work. The students should also be advised to reflect only on thoughts they feel comfortable with, so that the practice of diary writing would not interfere with their privacy.

CONCLUSION

This paper was concerned with diary writing as one of the main tools for language practice and learning enhancement in an EFL classroom. The investigation was based in the English Department in the College of Basic Education. The participants, English primary teachers-to-be, attempted to write their daily diary for a full semester. During this period, their instructor encouraged them to write as much as they can, expressing their feelings and needs in any way they desire. After analyzing the data obtained from the questionnaire and the open-ended questions, it was found that the central outcome of diary writing was that it encourages students to gain more enjoyable experience in writing techniques enabling them to practice the organization of ideas and experience creativity allowing autonomous and independent learning.

Moreover, researchers found that diary writing is not only a method of language skill enhancement, but it also boosted self-confidence through the instructors' encouragement. Notably, the students

developed a positive attitude towards daily writing. The findings also highlighted enormous enhancement in their motivation to undertake more demanding tasks to develop their writing skill. With this in mind, the study revealed an intimate relationship between the students and their teacher which reflected a positive and affective bond with their teacher, and created an environment for improving their learning and achieving their goals. Finally, this study was carried in anticipation of encouraging teachers to contribute in carrying out more studies in future to inspire them find different ways for learners' preferences and give them appropriate assistance to their problems.

On the other hand, the researchers also found that diary writing sometimes could be considered a burden as it might be time-consuming. Some students complained about the lack of ideas, or things to write about. Very few students felt that diaries should be secretive, and not shared. These issues should be considered enable to design a better context for students 'free writing' tasks. In this light, the researchers recommend that dairy writing should not be a daily task; yet, students might be given a number of days to write during the semester, where the students are able to choose the convenient time for them. In addition, for students who do not feel comfortable writing a diary, they could simply reflect on their experience in the writing class.

In conclusion, although diary writing has shown to have some disadvantages, it has been clearly presented in this paper that the advantages by far outweighed the disadvantages. Not only did students reflect their belief that they have improved their language skills, but they also enjoyed their class more and felt more confident in their writing. The idea of writing a diary presses the need for more writing, uncontrolled and completely based on the students' taste and desire, allowing them to produce a piece of work they are passionate about; a practice that inspires unconscious learning.

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