
THE EFFECT OF DIARY WRITING ON EFL STUDENTS' WRITING AND LANGUAGE ABILITIES

Hanan A. Taqi¹, Rahima S. Akbar¹, Nowreyah A. Al-Nouh¹, Abdulmohsen A. Dashti¹

¹The English Department, College of Basic Education, Ardhya, Kuwait

ABSTRACT: *In the field of teaching EFL students the process of writing an essay, this study was conducted to investigate the influence of diary writing on the students' writing and language abilities. 52 student participants enrolled in two Advanced Writing classes wrote a daily diary for 14 weeks. During this period, they were given essay writing lessons, and were asked to write four essays throughout the semester. At the end of the semester, the students were given an open-ended questionnaire requesting information about the students' method of diary writing and its benefits. The analysis of the data obtained showed that the students' language abilities significantly improved especially the grammar and vocabulary. The students also reported their satisfaction in the free-writing method which allowed them to learn more on self-expression and organization of ideas. The researchers believe that a skilful writing teacher would be able to provide maximum benefit from this experience. This study is believed to be extremely beneficial to language teachers, and more specifically, EFL writing teachers.*

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

INTRODUCTION

Writing is a complex skill to learn and to teach, as it necessitates the acquisition of many other skills (Ningrum et al., 2013). According to Meyers (2005) writing is similar to producing speech. It is a way of communicating with others through paper. As a writer writes, he performs an action of producing, organizing and expressing ideas in a way that is comprehensible for the reader or the audience.

One way of improving writing skills is through constant writing. The more students write the more their writing skills develop. But writing has to be meaningful to the writer, and even more important, writing has to be interesting. Thus, the notion of 'diary' came into existence as a reaction against the traditional methods of writing where the focus is usually on the end product stressing correctness of form and paying attention to the mechanics of writing rather than the message the writer tries to send (CamTESOL Conference, 2008).

Diaries, according to the literature, are part of the learner-centred approach where learners take responsibility of their own and where learning is more successful. McDonough and McDonough (1997) emphasize the role of diaries as a means for autonomous learning where the writer is in control of his/her own writing not worrying about grammar and the mechanics of writings. Allison (1998) further adds that when learners choose their own topic to write about, they are more immersed in the language. The more learners have choices to make, the better learning takes place and the more learners are motivated and interested in the activity.

The following study investigates the usefulness of diary writing in a writing class. Diary writing, as a meaningful and most probably interesting process of writing, allows students to write freely and continuously. The teacher's role in this process is supervision and encouragement only, standing far from judgment and correcting.

In this research paper, the authors will provide a comprehensive literature review which covers definitions related to diary writing and previous experience with this type of writing. This will be followed with the research questions and methodologies utilized to investigate the answers to these questions. The results will then be presented, and followed by an extensive discussion. The authors anticipate that this study would be very useful for EFL teachers worldwide as it reflects the ability to learn more from a simple method.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Background

Writing is a procedure that needs not only ideas but vocabulary, grammar and punctuation to express those ideas. Harmer (2004) believes that good writing is a complex process compared to speech. To master writing, a writer needs to master all the features related to it including a rich vocabulary, knowledge of grammar and the mechanics of writing. (Bitchener, 2008).

Although, teacher-written feedback is seen by both teachers and students as necessary in the writing process (Goldstein, 2004; Ferris, 2002), some authors believe that it has a detrimental effect on students' writing (Truscott, 2007; Truscott & Hsu, 2008). For example, Truscott (2004) argues that corrective feedback may have a negative effect on students' writing fluency which might affect their overall writing. Hence, teachers need to provide indirect feedback (Ferris, 2004). Straub (1997) notes that students prefer feedback on their overall writing such as topic, organization coherence and cohesion as well as on vocabulary, spelling, grammar and punctuation.

As a reaction towards the traditional methods of writing, the idea of 'diary' came into existence. The word 'diary' came from the Latin word 'diarium' where 'di-' means 'day' in modern English and the suffix 'arium' and its modern equivalent the suffix 'ary' stands for 'in connection with or pertaining to'. Thus, a diary is a daily log that records the events that happen during the day. It is updated on a daily basis, private and written for an audience of one.

An extensive review of the literature has revealed multiple definitions for a diary (Brogoff, 1975; Bailey's, 1990; Richards, 1992; Porter et al. 1996; Hiemstra, 2001; Johnson, 2002; Curtis & Bailey, 2009; Barjesteh et al. 2011; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2011). For instance, most authors see that a diary is usually handwritten, arranged by date for the expression of personal feelings, thoughts and experiences on daily basis and it is not intended for publication (Johnson, 2002; Curtis & Bailey, 2009). Others look at diaries as a kind of free-writing activity where writers write without fear of being evaluated (Barjesteh et al., 2011). Still, others see it as an introspective research tool for the initiation of writing and communicating meaning (Porter et al. 1996). Bailey (1990), for example, defines a diary study as a first person account of a language learning or teaching experience written regularly and is analyzed later for recurring themes. Similarly, Hiemstra (2001) writes about learning diaries where learners record their thoughts, feelings and reactions to specific course activities.

Diaries usually focus on meaning rather than form where learners send a message about a topic of interest to them. Similarly, teachers do not correct linguistic errors but respond to the message in a meaningful way. Hence, learners have the freedom of writing without worrying about form (Bagheri & Pourgharib, 2013). Fluency, according to Brown (1994 in Patterson, 2014) is "saying or writing a steady flow of language for a short period of time without any self or other correction at all." Mac-Gown-Gilhooly (1991) reports that when fluency was stressed over accuracy in classrooms, learners showed more signs of self-confidence and teachers noticed students writing apprehension decreased, specifically for slow learners. Students also felt better as they developed more fluency in writing and were able to generate more ideas compared to when they were

corrected on form (McDonough & McDonough, 1997; Rubin, 2003). In spite of that, learners' responses in diaries differ where some report stories while others list a number of activities.

Having said that, it appears that diaries are used in the classroom to accomplish a number of purposes. 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.

Likewise, diaries gain more importance in the literature not only for their different uses but mainly for the benefits and gains they may fulfil. A large part of the literature was devoted to a description of this issue. While Barjesteh et al. (2011) talks about a diary being beneficial as it makes students write more, Elbow (1998) stressed the fact that diaries should not be edited which results in increasing students' fluency. They can also use the diaries for reflection to go back and evaluate their own performance. This promotes autonomous learning where students take the responsibility of their own learning, monitor their progress and the strategies they use which will eventually result in developing their cognitive skills (Richard & Lockhart, 1996; Lagan, 2000; Marefat, 2002; Hamp & Heasley, 2006; Kirkgoz, 2009).

As to research, diaries are excellent tools for language research as Nunan (1992) says that diaries can be "important introspective tools in language research" (p.118). They help researchers elicit valuable knowledge about learners "they give us access to participants voices (Bailey & Nunan, 1996:199). Learners can also get their problems solved by talking about them and teachers gain valuable insights to the language learning processes. (Peterson, 2012).

It follows that writing is an important skill especially for college students who are going through an important time in their lives where they experience change in their personality and educational career. Thus, it is crucial to find out how classroom practices affect students during their college life. One of the classroom practices that is thought to have an effect on students' progress is 'praise', defined as "favourable interpersonal feedback" (Baumeister et al. 1990) or "positive evaluations made by a person of another's products, performances or attributes".

The theory behind 'praise' goes back to behaviourism in 1940s and 1950s in the United States. According to Skinner when children learning their first language imitate the words they hear around them, their endeavours are rewarded in the form of 'praise' or as Skinner called it 'positive reinforcement'. Praise encourages the action to be repeated as children continue to imitate and produce words (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

Although praise heightens motivation, not all kinds of praise do that. Authors have therefore differentiated between two kinds of praise; a praise that focuses on learners' efforts and strategies to encourage learners work harder and exert more effort, and the praise where the focus shifts to the learners' personality traits and abilities, and as a result would not produce the same outcome (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). Consequently, praising low achievers' work would go a long way in motivating them to work harder. By persuading them that they can succeed, weak students' self-esteem and academic attainment is improved.

Educators, teachers and policy makers agree that students need praise and encouragement no matter at what level they are as it boosts their academic success (Bluestein, 2004; Lipnevich & Smith, 2008; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2012). Since writing is an act of confidence, Mina Shaughnessy says (1977:85) "it is not surprising that the scholarly tradition emphasizes responding with encouragement". A senior research associate for the Educational Testing Service-(Diedrich, 1963, 1974) claims that praising students' writing will improve their writing practice more than

mere correction of errors. He further adds, praise will work more for the less able students to motivate them to write (Daiker, 2011).

On the other hand, some researchers believe that praise may take attention from the task at hand and focus it on the self which may result in failure (Kluger & Denisi, 1996). More researchers warned against the kind of feedback given and the context it was given at where they argue that praise may end up with students losing their motivation and interest in the task (Corpus, Ogle & Love-Geigner, 2006). Still, others believe that praise improves students' self-esteem and confidence and thus improves their learning (Alber & Haward, 2000). Therefore, praise given in the right place and time and to the right people can boost students' intrinsic motivation, academic performance and self-esteem.

To sum up, writing is a crucial skill especially at college where students are required to hand in different kinds of written assignments. Diaries are seen as good examples of writing where students write without fear of being corrected on grammar and spelling and where their attempts are praised. Writing regularly results in fluency and improvement of writing skill. Nevertheless, Haimovitz & Corpus, (2011) report that a search through the literature has shown most of the studies done on the topic of 'praise' were related to children and only a few discussed the topic in relation with adults. Thus, the present study intends to look at college students' diaries and the effect of praise on their performance.

Previous Studies

Research findings suggest that keeping diaries improve students' writing ability. Most of the studies in the literature focused on journal writing. In this paper we will only report those studies where the researcher used the term 'diary' and 'journal' interchangeably. For example, in Indonesia, Wafa, Syaifei & Riyono (2010) wanted to investigate whether there is a significance progress in 38 10th grade EFL students' writing ability after keeping journal writing at SMA NI Jekulo Kudus. They used experimental design with a pre-test post-test design. Results showed that students' scores increased by writing a journal. It stimulated their imagination and their power of imagination improved. It also helped to build their vocabulary. Students were less afraid to express their thoughts or make mistakes. They concluded that overall students' writing ability is good. Journals were effective tools for improving students' writing. However, they reported students still having difficulty with grammar and vocabulary.

Similarly, to find out whether journal writing enhances students' writing skill in relation to accuracy and fluency and whether it increases students' writing motivation, Tuan (2010), in Vietnam, conducted a study on 85 university students taking a writing class. The experimental group did journal writing outside and inside class while the control only wrote normal essays. Using a pre-test post-test design results revealed that the writing fluency of the experimental group was higher than the control group. Also, the experimental group showed more writing accuracy compared to the control. They were more motivated and showed fluency and accuracy in writing.

In an earlier study, using course diaries and students' questionnaires, Allison (1998) investigated the use of language course diaries as a means of language exploration by learners. Thirty eight undergraduate students in an English language course at the National University of Singapore were asked to keep diaries to apply ideas they learned in the course to the analysis of texts of their own and to raise questions about course content and were given questionnaires at the end of the course about their diaries. Findings showed some students wrote thoroughly while others made brief notes in their diaries. No critical reflection was found and students' questions focused on content issues. The questionnaire showed students' positive attitude to the use of diaries as a writing activity. It helped them to generate lots of questions about course content.

On similar grounds and in a more recent study in Mexico, Lewis (2009) wanted to investigate the perception of Spanish speaking university students of the experience of an EFL course which

included their L1. Students were told to express their feelings and thoughts about the experience in their diaries. They also need to write an essay in English about it at the end of the course and finally answer a questionnaire in their L1. Results showed that the use of L1 lowered their anxiety level, improved their affect, encouraged a learner-centred curriculum, improved their attitude towards learning the L2 and improved their understanding of course materials.

While the above studies examined the use of diaries, journals and blogs as a tool for reflection on course content, other studies explored the usefulness of diary as a writing tool. For example, Guy (2004) investigated the use of diaries and learning journals with 14 fourth year biology class in Scottish secondary school. Students wrote diaries for five minutes every lesson for 8 weeks which were read once a week by the teacher. Results revealed students' satisfaction with writing a diary since they were not corrected for grammar and spelling; however, diaries showed little evidence for reflection.

Other researchers addressed students' feelings and attitudes in relation to diary writing. To examine students' diaries and encourage reflection of students to specifically address their needs, feelings, attitudes and gains, Marefat (2002) conducted a study on 80 Persian speaking undergraduate students majoring in English taking an advanced writing and essay writing class. Students were told to keep diaries for two weeks. Results showed diary writing was a useful experience for students. Students enjoyed the activity. The author recommended that students need intensive training to help them participate fully in the process. Variation on the topic is preferred, so student won't lose interest quickly.

From investigating feelings and attitudes, to investigating the experiences of learners in their attempts to master the language as reflected in their diaries (Mahadzir, Ismail & Ramakrishnan, 2007). Mahadzir et al. told 7 Malay undergraduate 1st year students to write their diaries for two semesters in English. Later, diaries were collected and interviews were conducted during and at the end of diary writing. Results showed that students' experiences are guided by outside influences e.g. teachers, language activities and classroom interaction.

In Indonesia, Fitriana (2009) wanted to describe grade 9 students' mastery in creating recount texts looking at generic structure, linguistic features, grammar, vocabulary, coherence, cohesion and unity. 30 Indonesian Junior high school students were asked to write their diaries. Results revealed all students can write recount text, including the mastery of generic structure, linguistic feature, coherence, cohesion and unity; however, they had a problem with vocabulary and grammar. It is suggested to focus more on grammar and to use vocabulary in daily life as well as classroom activities.

In line with the above study and to find out the effectiveness of diary writing in improving the students' mastery of writing recount text with a focus on mastering the use of the past tense, Hidayat (2011) used an experimental design with two groups of learners, an experimental and a control group. Using a pre-test and a post-test it was found that there were significant differences between the results of both groups in the post-test. The experimental group did better in writing after using diary writing. Hidayat concluded that diary writing is an effective method to improve students' writings.

Like Fitriana (2009) and Hidayat (2011), Ningrum, Rita and Hastini (2013) wanted to find out whether the use of diary writing improves writing recount text of 52 10th grade EFL Indonesian students from two classes. They used pre-test post-test design where every meeting for 8 meetings students were asked to write about something that happened to them to develop their writing skill through writing a diary. Results showed 48% of the class got higher scores on the post-test compared to one students in the pre-test. Students believed that using diaries improved their writing skills. Thus, it was concluded that diary writing was effective for teaching recount texts.

Furthermore, Safitri (2011) wanted to know the effect of writing a diary on the eight grade students' writing achievement in Indonesia. An experimental design was used with an

experimental class and a control class. Both groups got a pre- test at the beginning and a post-test at the end of treatment for both groups. Results showed a significant effect of writing a diary on students' writing achievement. It is concluded that students continue writing their diaries to improve their writing ability.

With respect to vocabulary knowledge and to find out about students' growth in vocabulary knowledge and strategies used by students in learning, Kirkgoz (2009) asked 32 first year Turkish undergraduate prospective teachers of English in a vocabulary course for one semester (14 weeks) to write diaries. Results showed that students used a number of techniques e.g. the keyword technique, grouping words that sound the same together, visualizing, making associations and making use of linguistic knowledge. It is concluded that diary keeping was beneficial. It showed students' learning strategies and helped them know about these strategies and become autonomous learners. It helped teachers evaluate the effectiveness of their course and understand learning.

In a more recent study, Huang (2010) investigated the effect of free writing on EFL freshman college students' writing fluency, writing quality and students' writing confidence. 8 Thai students enrolled in an 8-week intensive English academic writing class were given an 8-week of free writing sessions to write in their diaries. A pre-test was given at the beginning of the course and a post-test at the end. Findings showed free writing helped EFL college students increase their writing fluency as a result of writing their diaries. This was proved in the post-test after 8 weeks of practicing free writing as students' test scores increased. Also, students' confidence increased as a result of free writing.

Similarly, Barjesteh, Vaseghi & Gholami (2011) wanted to evaluate EFL college students' grammatical development and their writing fluency. 44 Iranian EFL university students were put into two groups, experimental and control. A pre-test (an English test) was given to both groups then the experimental group was told to write a diary on regular basis. Finally, a post-test (two writing tests) was given to both groups. They were also given two questionnaires in the pre-test and post-test sessions to measure their attitudes to writing. While all the above studies have shown a positive effect for diary writing on students' writing fluency and vocabulary learning, this study showed that diary writing does not improve grammatical accuracy of the EFL college students' writing. However, it did prove that diary writing increases students' self-confidence, writing fluency and attitudes towards writing.

As seen in the literature review above, most of the studies used diaries to explore students' thoughts and reactions towards course materials and content or their feelings, attitudes and the effect of free writing on their confidence. A few studies have investigated the effect of diary writing on students' fluency, knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Also, a large part of those studies were devoted to reporting in-service teachers' reflections on their practice to gain more insight into the teaching profession or to find out about their students' learning strategies and difficulties in learning the foreign language. Additionally, most of those studies were done in ESL contexts. Hence, the present study intends to add to the literature by looking at adult learners in EFL contexts and to investigate how diaries affect their writing fluency, grammar and vocabulary.

Research questions

The present study intends to answer the following question:

What are the language benefits of diary writing?

And to be able to reach an answer to that question, the following questions need to be addressed,

- a. Does diary writing improve their overall writing?
- b. Does diary writing improve their grammar?
- c. Does diary writing improve their vocabulary?
- d. Do the students believe diary writing helped improve their language?

METHODOLOGY

Procedure & participants

The study was conducted in the College of Basic Education, in the English Department. It was conducted in Fall 2014/2015 on two Advanced Writing classes, with a total of 52 students. The students were requested to write a daily diary on any topic of their choice. The students were encouraged to write as much as they can and express themselves in different ways.

In the beginning, the students wrote ten diary entries, after which the instructor collected the diaries. The instructor then read each diary and at the end of each entry wrote a comment. The comment encourages self-expression and more writing. Some comments are about interesting topics, and topics that the instructor would have liked to hear more about. However, the instructor does not comment on the vocabulary employed or grammatical mistakes (as the main goal is continuously writing). The diaries are returned to the students in the next lecture, and the students are requested to continue writing.

In class, the teacher pinpoints main features in diary writing. She describes what she liked most and what she liked least. The in-class discussion does not take longer than 15 minutes, where students also discuss the difficulties they faced, and the things they might change starting the next entry. This discussion is considered an indirect way of guiding the students. The diary discussion is later minimized to five minutes.

On the final week, the diaries are collected to view the amount of writing, and connect the comments with the change in writing styles and quantity. In addition, the students hand in their writing portfolio, which consists of four Essays written in different styles: description, chronological order, process analysis, and comparison and contrast. The grades are entered in SPSS and calculated in terms of mean and average percentage. The researchers also enter detailed grade for one of the classes to compare the vocabulary, grammar, and cohesion and coherence between the first and last essay to be able to attain any differences.

Finally, an open-ended questionnaire, which consists of six questions and a comment space investigating the difficulties students found while writing a diary and how they found the diary writing experience in general. The data obtained from the questionnaire was linked to the grades in order to reflect on the students' achievement and perception in relation to diary writing.

RESULTS

The results were divided into two main parts; namely, the grades and the open-ended questionnaire.

The grades

The grades were calculated for four essays. In the beginning, the average for the entire essay work was calculated. The average of all essay grades was 48.6%, which is a very low grade. However, when analysing the situation further, it was found that the grades were showing gradual improvement. The statistics showed that the average for the first essay was 40.3% (where $m=8.07$). The lowest grade in the first essay was 0% and the highest grade was 90%. Slight improvement was reflected in the second essay as $m=8.86$ (44.3%). No significance was found in this very slight improvement. The third essay average also showed improvement. The students obtained an average of 51.2%. The difference between the averages of the second and third essay was found at $p=0.013$ (where significance was found at ≤ 0.05). In addition, high significance was found between the difference in essay one and three, as $p\leq 0.01$. When calculating the average for the fourth essay, the average reached 57.6% ($m=11.54$), where the lowest grade was 0% and the

highest grade was 95%. This improvement was highly significant when correlating with the average for the first and third essay (where $p \leq 0.01$ in both cases).

When analysing the vocabulary of the essays to look for any change in the vocabulary grades from the first to the fourth essay, difference was found. The average percentage of the vocabulary in the first essay was found to be 54.8%. The lowest vocabulary grade was 0 out of a possible 10, and the highest grade was a 9. The average vocabulary grade for essay four, on the other hand, was 59.4%, as the lowest grade was 0 and the highest was also 9. In a T-Test for the first vocabulary average and second average, it was found that significance occurred at $p \leq 0.01$

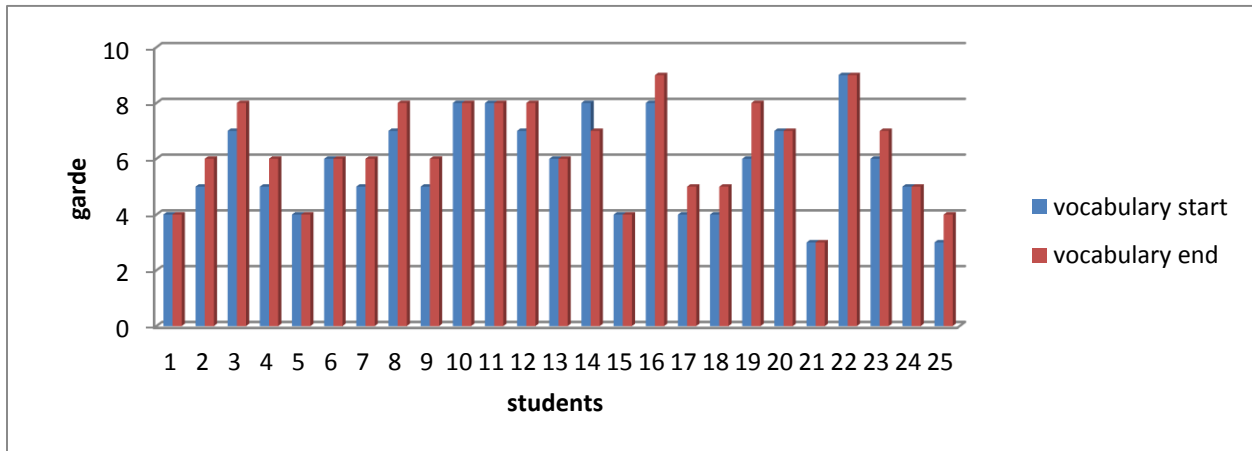


Figure 1. The difference in vocabulary between the first and last essays

In the grammar section, the percentages were also calculated for the first and last essay. In the first essay, the average obtained by the class was 36%. The highest grade obtained was an 8 out of a possible 10, while the lowest grade was 0. In the last essay, however, the grade slightly improved to reach 41%, where the lowest grade was still 0, but the highest grade was surprisingly lower than the first essay (7points). In a one paired T-Test measuring the correlation between the two grammar results, high significance was found at $p \leq 0.01$.

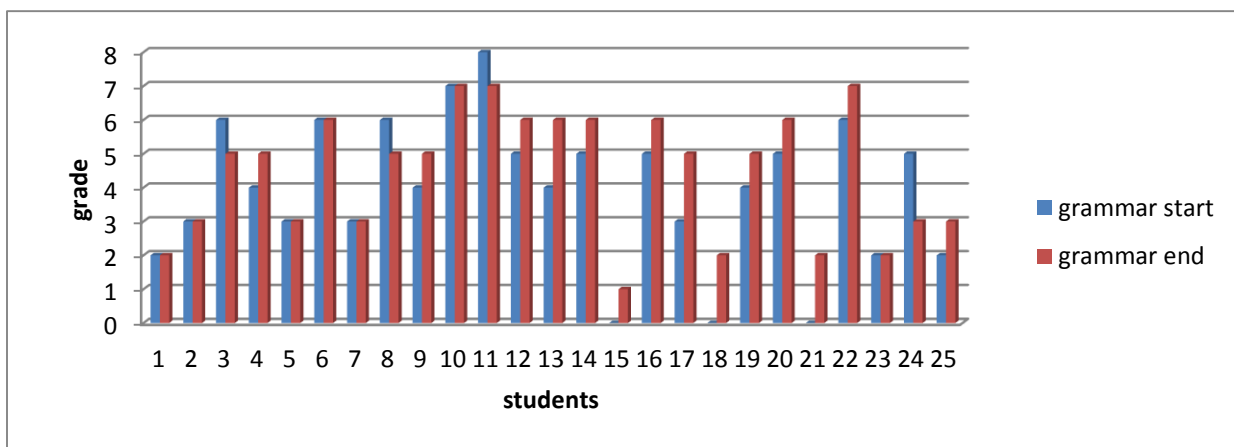


Figure 2. The difference in grammar between the first and last essays

As for the coherence and cohesion element, it appears that the average percentage obtained in all essays (64.5%) is higher than the vocabulary and grammar averages (56.5% and 38.5% successively). The lowest grade in the first essay was 4 out of a possible 10, while the maximum grade obtained was 10. The average grade for coherence and cohesion in the first essay was 63%, as opposed to 67% in the final essay. A paired T-Test clearly shows high significance of $p \leq 0.01$ between the two essays in light of coherence and cohesion (where significance is calculated at $p \leq 0.05$).

It appears from the statistics that although the differences between the average essay grades may seem minor, there appears to be statistical significance that points toward affective change.

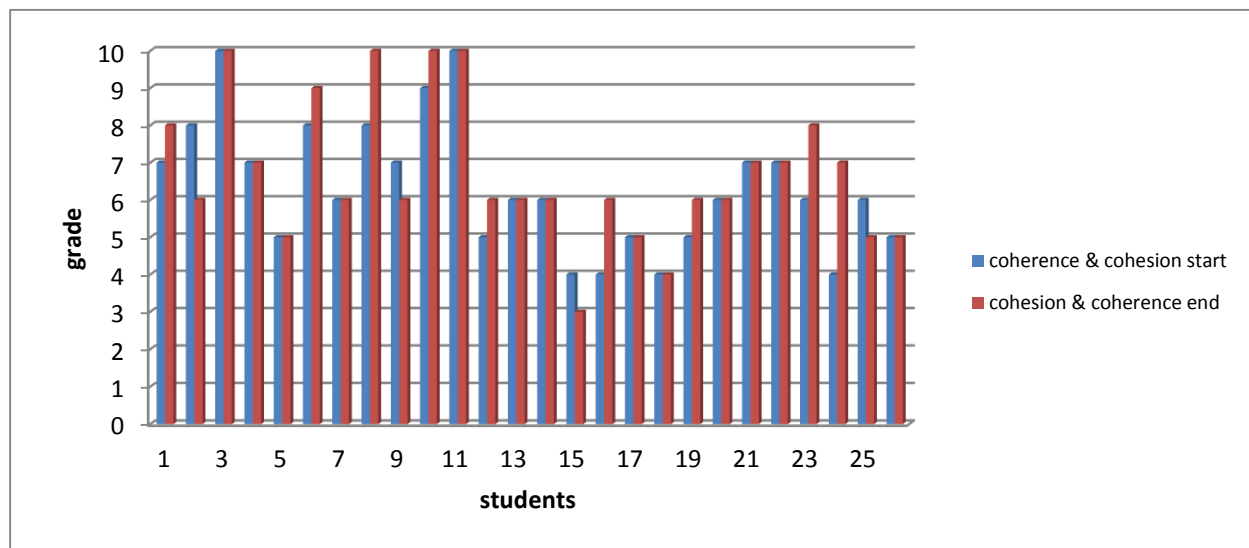


Figure 3. The difference in coherence and cohesion between the first and last essays

The questionnaire

The questionnaire aimed at noting whether the students realized that their writing has improved, and whether they sense this improvement was due to diary writing. The first question enquired the students about their writing after the diary experience. Only 11.5% of the students felt that diary writing did not improve their writing at all. One of the students admitted she has not used her imagination at all as the instructor kept asking them, and did not write daily. One student believed that her writing did not improve, yet she was able to organize her ideas faster. Only two students answered the question with “I don’t know”, as they believed that only the instructor would be able to answer that question.

When the students were asked about the steps they followed to write their diary, most students (61%) started by writing the date, and immediately started to write about the daily events. The students described the process as being chronological. It appears that most students would like to think about what happened in the beginning of the day, right before the time they go to bed. 42% of the students express their feelings towards the events after mentioning the event. A student commented on this step by stating,

“At the beginning...I would write what happened at every hour. Later (after the instructions), I found out that I need to write about events in my day that touched my feelings the most”

It appeared from the second question that most students started by writing about their daily routine, which seemed to bore them; and after receiving feedback from the instructor, changed their writing goal from routine to expression of feelings. They found this change more interesting and worthwhile.

From the third question, it is clear that the students have two main problems: need for time and need for topics to write about. While these were the two main problems, some students felt that the limited vocabulary they had was a problem too. However, since the limited vocabulary caused a barrier when intending to write, these students stated that they spent a lot of their time looking up words in a dictionary.

Hence, the students who could not think of a topic spent more time writing a diary, and students who had many things to do would usually write less. The problems that the students reported were mostly attached to time and the need to write the diary as an assignment instead of considering it a fun task.

Most students (92%) stated that diary writing was a new experience for them. Some students had had what they called a 'diary' experience but appeared to be an autograph book they kept when they were in middle-school. The four students who used to write a diary wrote it in Arabic only.

The average grade the diary experience obtained out of 10 was 7. While many students gave it 10 out of 10, some gave it a 1. However, since the majority of students believed they learned from this experience, it was very much expected that the experience will get a high 7 out of 10. One student who gave the experience a 10 stated that the diary experience was an excellent one because she kept searching for answers to things online, and had to read more often enable to write what she aimed at writing. Moreover, four of the participants who gave the experience a 10 reflected their appreciation towards a process of writing that was not judged for grammatical and vocabulary mistakes, rather it was judged for interest and the ability to communicate an idea.

What the instructor found notable during the diary experience was that many students felt comfortable with their writing style after receiving praise for their diary writing effort. They, hence, seemed to ignore the fact that assignments are graded for language as much as it was graded for the ability to express an idea. This confusion caused dissatisfaction with assignment grades, as students expected excellent grades since they organised their ideas.

Another notable issue was the reflection of praise on the students' next journal entry. It was eminent that sometimes praise held the students back from doing better. When the instructor wrote admirable feedback on the diaries, these diaries returned later with the same level of writing if not less. While the students who received less praise appeared to work harder to receive better praise. Hence, praise seemed to be a two edged weapon; it encouraged some students to work harder aiming at more praise, while it dispirited the better students as it gave the impression that they did not need to do more.

DISCUSSION

Assignment scores

An overall average of less than 50% mark (about 10% below the course pass grade) in the students' essay work signals a serious problem our students encounter in one of the most essential skills that would certainly hinder their proficiency in the language. Such a low overall grade may urge a wake-up call to educators and policy makers to look for the reasons behind the students' low achievement levels, especially when someone bears in mind that our study's participants will graduate to become future teachers of English. It is worth mentioning at this point that the students have gone through twelve years of learning English as a foreign language, where English is taught as a major subject that holds a major slot in their school schedule. Writing, amongst other skills,

tends to be one of the main skills the students are taught, and a fundamental proportion of their grading scheme is allocated for it. Graduating high school students with such devastated results is definitely placing a huge question mark on the way our students are being taught, material being used, and evaluation system being followed in schools.

Furthermore, a gradual escalation in the average scores of the students across the four graded essay writing tasks tends to reflect a gradual improvement in the writers' writing abilities. Despite the fact that the difference in the average grading scores between the first and second essays seems to be minimal, the continual significant improvement across the second and third, and the third and fourth would certainly indicate that the students are undergoing a definite progress in their writing skill. The finding poses two fundamental questions. The first is whether the students' improved scores may safely be related to our study's utilized intervention of diary writing, and the second is whether the overall progress has resulted from a certain component in writing or a comprehensive writing ability.

A closer look into the students' major assessment criteria has shown a gradual progress in their vocabulary use, with the figures significantly escalating in 5%, and another 5% of progression in their grammar. Opposite to some previous research on the same topic (refer to Barjesteh et al, 2011; Fitriana, 2009), our finding indicates that our students have certainly gained higher proficiency levels in English, particularly in the two aspects of vocabulary and grammar.

On the other hand, the students' writing pieces were assessed content-wise, mainly in terms of their ability to write well cohesive/coherent accounts. A comprehensive examination of the two criteria presents less problematic overall standards, compared to extremely unexpected low levels of writing form-wise, with the average getting slightly beyond the required pass mark. Once again, the findings indicate a progression reaching 4% between the students' initial and final writing pieces. Such a significant jump may also imply that our students were gradually capable of producing enhanced pieces of writing that are satisfactorily content-appealing to their professors. Apparently, our students have developed their abilities to compose well-organized pieces, and less fragmented recounts during the interventional process of diary writing. However, can we safely assume that such an advancement is the product of diary writing?

We believe that an answer may only be obtained by looking at the students' responses to a number of open ended questions on their diary writing experience throughout the course.

Diary feedback

The students' perceived effects of diary writing on their writing skills were established based on the qualitative analyses of the students responses on a number of open-ended questions presented in the questionnaire. The process reveals a number of crucial findings, that were manifested to unravel our uncertainty as to how much of the students' improved writing skills can be the product of diary writing. These may be listed as follows:

a. Our sample seems to have mostly agreed that they have experienced a vivid enhancement in their writing as a result of diary writing. The few students who disagree have also admitted that they didn't take the task of diary writing seriously as they should. Even those who responded with 'didn't know' tend not to express any disapproval, but to leave the decision on their improvement to be made by their professors.

b. The majority of our sample seems to have started the process of diary writing by jotting down a list of events that took place during the day chronologically. Less than half of them have also added their feelings about some of the listed events. It was only after the students being instructed not to do so, when they have realized that the objective was rather to write about important events and the way they marked their feelings as well as their acts. When they did so, they started to feel the change and appreciate its soothing effect. It is very

important for the writing class instructor to bear in mind that we'd like to avoid burdening the students with extra work that may overwhelm the learners in a way that may keep them less oriented to the fundamental objectives of the writing course. We therefore press the necessity of providing the students with adequate instructions on the task of diary writing before assigning it to a writing class, particularly as the questionnaire findings suggest diary writing to be a newly experienced task by the vast majority of the students (over 90%); even those who claimed they did write 'autographs' before, explain they wrote them in Arabic, a process that might have followed a completely different structure. Accordingly, we propose giving out a few well-written diary samples prior to the task assignment.

c. When the students were asked about the problems they encountered during the task achievement, they mainly stated time and topic constrains. Should the instructor provide the students with an adequate time frame to fulfil the task of diary writing alongside the students' major assigned thematic essay writing, the students might have reached their utmost writing potential after minimizing the fear of not being able to finish both tasks on time and up to the standard of the instructor. As for topic, we suggest discussing some of the students' diaries in class to inspire those who might be experiencing the problem of thinking of innovative ideas. In doing so, it is crucial to keep in mind that the instructor should keep the factor of time during the integration of diary writing in a writing course, may be considering minimizing the number of expected writing pieces, in an attempt to trade quantity for quality. Despite the fact the students described having a limited range of vocabulary as problematic, the way they tried to resolve the issue by spending some of their times to look up words might have resulted in the progress in their vocabulary use as quantified in their grading of the course main writing pieces. The finding might add up another entity to safely relate their scoring progression to the study's intervention of diary writing, rather than any other learning processes that might have taken place throughout the course teaching.

d. The students overall evaluation of the task of diary writing seems to be high enough to safely suggest it as a positive experience. Such a high positive perception has been justified by those who graded the task with a full 10 out of 10 score to be enabling them to write fluently after looking for a few related issues to their assigned written task and gaining the required information on line; more importantly, many of the informants expressed their appreciation of diary writing as the task trades form for content. It is apparent that the students are more likely to enjoy writing when they are not overwhelmed by monitoring their grammatical and vocabulary errors. Once that barrier of form is broken, they start to express themselves with higher levels of fluency.

e. An important factor that seems to have affected the students' grades on the main course assignments was praising. As the students were praised by the instructors for the effort they put into their diaries regardless to their obtained accuracy levels, they tended to have ignored accuracy in the course main tasks of writing. Such a confusing situation between what they should and what they shouldn't focus on to obtain their instructor's satisfaction has also led to the students' negligence of gaining satisfactory levels of accuracy in their main writing tasks. Not only has praise affected the students' accuracy levels in the course main tasks, but also it was misunderstood by a number of them, whose praised diary has kept their levels of writing of the next diary stagnant. The finding tends to highlight the effect of praise on adults' motivational levels. Certainly, the way our sample has perceived praising should indicate that keeping adult learners at such a high comfortable zone may set their efforts back and hinder their progress. Nevertheless, further studies should be conducted to find out how much comfort is to be described as too comfortable, leading the learner to fall into the demotivating zone.

CONCLUSION

This study was an attempt to investigate the influence of diary writing on EFL students' writing and language abilities. Through utilising an open-ended questionnaire together with asking the students to write four writing essays, the study came up with a number of interesting findings. Generally speaking, the students displayed positive attitudes towards diary writing, as they highly appreciated the opportunity of experiencing the process of diary writing offered to them by their instructors. The study pinpointed the fact that diary writing may well be one of the efficient strategies instructors may employ to improve not only students' writing skills, but also their level of achievement in other language areas such as vocabulary and grammar, especially when they are allowed to work in a free, unmonitored environment. In addition, the study highlighted the importance of content-wise assessment of students' written assignments rather than form-wise assessment, as they have continuously been exposed to the latter during past years with no perceptible sign of improvement in their writing skills. Having said that does not rule out the fact that, diary writing, being a novel experience to them, needs to be better implemented by skilful writing class instructors. It is suggested that writing class instructors should be highly encouraged to provide the students with adequate instructions on the task of diary writing before assigning it to a writing class, as well as finding academic solutions to time and topic constraints. It is hoped that this paper would give an incentive to instructors dealing with EFL adult learners as to how instigate different writing strategies, one of which, is diary writing, in their writing classes, which would unquestionably, arise students' motivations. The level of the students writing, although enhanced significantly, is extremely alarming and certainly not suitable for English-teachers to be, thus requiring intensive effort. Finally, it is hoped as well that this paper posits a considerable addition to the existing literature as far as writing strategies are concerned.

REFERENCES:

- Absalom, M. & Leger, D. (2011). Reflecting on reflection: Learner perceptions of diaries and blogs in tertiary language study. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 10(8), 189-211.
- Alber, S. & Heward, W. (2000).
- Allison, D. (1998). Investigating learner's course diaries as explorations of language. *Language Teaching Research*, 2(1), 24-47.
- Bagheri, S. & Pourgharib, B. (2013). An investigation of the effect of journal writing on EFL learners' oral production. *International Research Journal of Applied and Basic Sciences*, 4 (11), 3520-3525.
- Bailey, K. (1990). The use of diary studies in teacher education programs. In J. C. Richards & D. Nunan (Eds.). *Second language teacher education*. (pp. 215-226) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bailey, K.; & Nunan, D. (Eds) (1996). *Voices from the language classroom: Qualitative Research in second language classroom*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Barjesteh, H.; Vaseghi, R. & Gholami, R. (2011). The effect of diary writing on EFL college students' writing improvement and attitudes. *International Conference on Languages, Literature and Linguistics IPEDR*, 26, 143-147.

- Baumeister, R.; Hutton, D. & Gairns, K. (1990). Negative effect of praise on skilled performance. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 11,131-148.
- Bitchener, J. (2008). Evidence in support of written corrective feedback. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 17,102-118.
- Bluestein, J. (2004). *Practical strategies for working successfully with difficult students*. Bellevue, WA: Bureau of Education and Research.
- Brown, H. (1994). *Teaching by principles: An interaction approach to language Pedagogy*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Corpus, J.; Ogle, C. & Love-Geigner, K. (2006). The effects of social-comparison versus mastery praise on children's intrinsic motivation. *Motivation and Emotion*, 30,335-345.
- Curtis, A., & Bailey, K. M. (2009). Diary studies: Research Digest. *OnCUE Journal*, 3(1),67-85.
- Daiker, D., A. (2011). Learning to praise. In I. L. Clark *concepts in composition: Theory and practice in the teaching of writing (2nd Ed.)*. New York: Routledge.
- Diederich, P. (1963). In praise of praise. *NEA Journal*. 52,58-59.
- Diederich, P. (1974). *Measuring growth in English*. Urbana: NCTE.
- Elbow, P. (1998). *Writing with power: Techniques for mastering the writing process (2nd ed.)* Oxford: Oxford University.
- Ferris, D. (2002). *Treatment of error in second language writing classes*. Ann Arbor, MI: Univerisyt of Michigan Press.
- Ferris, D. (2004). The "grammar correction" debate in L2 writing: Where are we, and where do we go from here? (and what do we do in the meantime...?) *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 13,49-62.
- Fitriana, D. (2009). The students' ability in creating written recount texts. *PhD Thesis*. University of Negeri Semarang. Indonesia.
- Goldstein, L. (2004). Questions and answers about teacher written commentary and student revision: Teachers and students working together. *Journal of Seocnd Language Writing*, 13,63-80.
- Guy, L. (2004). Diaries and Journals: an aid to learning? *Report on the findings of a research project funded by the General Teaching for Scotland (April 2004)*.
- Haimovitz, K.; Corpus, J. H. (2011). Effects of a person versus process praise on student motivation: Stability and change in emerging adulthood. *Educational Psychology: An international journal of experimental educational psychology*, 1-15 I First Article.
- Hamp-Lyons, L. & Heasley, B. (2006). *Study writing (2nd Ed.)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harmer, J. (2004). *How to teach writing*. Essex: Longman Group Ltd.
- Henderlong, J. & Lepper, M. (2002). The effects of praise on children's intrinsic motivation: A review and synthesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 128 (5),774-795.
- Hidayat, T. (2011). The use of diary writing method to improve students' writing recount

- text ability. *Bachelor's Degree, Semarang State University*.
- Hiemstra, R. (2001). Uses and benefits of journal writing. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 90,19-26.
- Huang, J. (2005). A diary study of difficulties and constraints in EFL learning. *System*, 33(4),609-621.
- Huang, J. A. (2010). A case study of the influence of free writing on writing fluency and Confidence of EFL college-level students. *Second Language Studies*, 28(2),97-134.
- Jacelon, C.S. & Imperio, K. (2005). Participant diaries as a source of data in research with older adults. *Qualitative health research*, 15(7),991-997.
- Johnson, A. (2002). Journal Writing for an audience. *Modern English Teacher*, 11(2),46-50.
- Kirkgoz, Y.(2009). Exploring growth in vocabulary learning through learner diaries. *Proceedings of the 10th METU ELT Convention*.
- Kluger, A. & DeNisi, A. (1996). The effect of feedback intervention on performance: Historical review, a meta-analysis and a preliminary feedback intervention theory. *Psychological Bulletin*, 119,254-284.
- Lagan, J. (2000). *College Writing Skills*. London: Longman.
- Lewis, K. (2009). Adult learners' perceptions of the incorporation of their L1 in foreign language teaching and learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 30(2),216-235.
- Lightbown, P. & Spada, N. (2006). *How language are learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lipnevich, A.A. & Smith, J.K. (2008). Response to assessment feedback: The effects of grades, praise, and source of information. *Educational Testing Service*.
<http://www.ets.org/research/content.html>.
- Mac Gowan-Gilhooly, A. (1991). Fluency first: Reversing the traditional ESL sequence. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 10, 73-87.
- Mahadzir, M. I.; Ismail, N.; Ramakrishnan, K.M. (2007). The diaries of ESL learners: A fresh look at language learning experience and process. *Institute of Research, Development & Commercialization (IRDC). Universiti Teknologi MARA Malaysia*.
- Marefat, F. (2002). The impact of diary analysis on teaching/learning writing. *RELC Journal*, 33(1), 101-121.
- McDonough, J., McDonough, S. (1997). *Research methods for English language teachers*. Arnold, London.
- Meyers, A. (2005). *Gateways to academic writing: Effective sentences, paragraphs and essays*. New York: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Ningrum, V., Rita, F. & Hastini (2013). *E-Journal of English Language Teaching Society (ELTS)*, 1 (1),1-13.
- Nunan, D. (1992). *Research methods in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press.

- Patterson, D. (2014). Using writing journals as a means of increasing EFL writing fluency. *Proceedings of ICLC 2013: The 5th International Conference on Language & Communication*, 81-91.
- Peterson, J. M. (2012). A self-directed approach to Turkish language acquisition: Diary study. *MA Thesis. Hamline University, Saint Paul, Minnesota.*
- Porter, A.; Goldstein, L.; Leatherman, J. & Conrad, S. (1990). An ongoing dialogue: Learning logs for teacher preparation. In J. Richards & D. Nunan (Eds.) *Second Language Teacher Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Porter, P.; Goldstein, L.; Leatherman, J. & Conrad, S. (1996). *An ongoing dialogue: Learning language for teacher preparation- SLT.*
- Progoff, I. (1975). *At a journal workshop*. New York: Dialogue House Library.
- Richards, K. (1992). Pepys into a TEFL course. *ELT Journal*, 46(2),144-152.
- Richards, J. & Lockhart, C. (1996). *Reflective teaching in second language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rubin, J. (2003). Diary writing as a process: simple, useful, powerful. *Guidelines*, 25(2),10-14.
- Safitri, Y. (2011). The effect of using diary on the eight grade students' achievement in writing a recount text at SMPN 2 BANGIL. *PHD Thesis. Jember University.*
- Schunk, D.H. & Zimmerman, B.J. (2012). *Motivation & self-regulated learning: Theory & Research and applications*. New York: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Shaughnessy, M. (1977). *Errors and expectations: A guide for the teacher of basic writing*. New York: Oxford UP.
- Straub, R. (1997). Students' reactions to teacher comments: an exploratory study. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 31(1),91-119.
- Truscott, J. (2004). Evidence and conjecture on the effect of correction: A response to Chandler. *Journal of second Language Writing*, 13,337-343.
- Truscott, J. (2007). The effect of error correction on learners' ability to write accurately. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 16,255-272.
- Truscott, J. & Hsu, A. (2008). Error correction, revision and learning. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 17,292-305.
- Tuan, L. T. (2010). Enhancing EFL learners' writing skill via journal writing. *English Language Teaching*, 3(3), 81-88.
- Wafa, A.; Syafei, M. & Riyono, A. (2010). *Keeping journal writing to improve the writing ability of the tenth grade students of SMA NI Jekulo Kudus in the academic year 2009/2010*. ISSN: 1979-6889.
- Walter-Echols, E. (2008). Journaling as writing, reflection, and personal expression. *CamTESOL Conference on English Language Teaching: Selected Papers*, 4,120-131.

Zittoun, T.; Gillespie, A. (2011). In E. Abbey & S. Surgan, (eds). *Using diaries and self-writings as data in Psychological research. Emerging Methods in Psychology: History & theory of Psychology*. Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA.