

A Review Of The Journal Writing As A Way To Improve Non-English Major Students' Writing

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Abstract

Writing is commonly seen as a medium for expressing thoughts, yet it is acknowledged as a challenging journey filled with obstacles. This challenge is particularly pronounced for individuals learning to write in a second language, often viewed as the final skill acquired in language learning. Even proficient Vietnamese students struggle with English essays, experiencing a sense of being stuck when faced with a blank page. This paper explores the impact of journal writing on non-English major students' writing skills. Initial findings indicate improved writing speed and increased motivation and interest among students. However, further investment in time, effort, and study preparation is necessary to validate these findings.

Keywords: *writing; non-English major students; journal writing*

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I. Introduction

Going into detail about the significance of writing and the challenges inherent in mastering this skill, particularly for non-native speakers, we can explore the multifaceted nature of writing and its implications for language learners:

Writing serves as a powerful tool for communication, allowing individuals to share ideas, evoke emotions, and influence others' perspectives. As noted by White & Arndt (1992), it provides a unique platform for discovering and articulating thoughts in ways that oral communication alone cannot achieve. However, despite its profound impact, mastering writing proves to be a daunting task for both native and non-native speakers alike.

The complexity of writing lies in the need to juggle various elements simultaneously, including content, organization, purpose, and audience, as highlighted by Ur (1996). Additionally, writers must navigate formal considerations such as handwriting legibility, spelling accuracy, punctuation correctness, grammatical proficiency, and vocabulary selection. For non-native speakers, this challenge is akin to traversing an unfamiliar, treacherous road, where they must demonstrate mastery of these elements in a language that is not their own.

Compounding the difficulty is the traditional approach to writing instruction, which often prioritizes the final product over the writing process itself. Grammar and punctuation tend to take precedence over content development and idea organization, relegating learners to passive recipients of writing rules rather than active participants in the creative process. Consequently, writing becomes a rare occurrence in the classroom, leading students to undervalue its importance and perceive writing skills as peripheral to their language learning journey.

Despite numerous studies examining the intricacies of language learning, the challenge of effectively teaching writing persists. In light of these ongoing difficulties, this paper endeavors to address the efficacy of journal writing as a potential solution for improving the writing skills of students in Vietnam. By adopting a longitudinal approach, this investigation aims to assess the impact of journal writing on students' writing proficiency over an extended period, shedding light on its potential benefits and limitations in the context of language education. Through rigorous analysis and empirical findings, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding writing instruction and pedagogical practices, with the ultimate goal of enhancing the quality of language learning experiences for students worldwide. To be more concrete, this study will try to find the answers to the following questions:

- 1. Can journal writing serve as a communication tool between small group members, and between students and teachers?*
- 2. Will journal writing as an extensive writing activity create learners' interest?*

II. The Rationale Of The Research

Many people would agree that learning to write well is a difficult and time-consuming process so one needs as many opportunities as possible to practise doing it. Brown (2015, p. 319) notes that 'writing is like swimming and just as there are non-swimmers, poor swimmers and excellent swimmers. So it is for writers'. The only way to be able to swim well is to practise swimming. Likewise, the only way to become a good English writer is to practise writing English. If we wish our students to be able to write well, the only way is to give them as many opportunities as possible to practise writing, as a common saying goes, 'Practice makes perfect'. Hess (2001) also states that 'Our students need to become comfortable with writing. To reach that level of comfort, they have to write a great deal' (p.78). Writing skill can only be developed through practical experience. While classroom writing is an important academic requirement, writing outside the class can be considered as a useful tool to enhance it. Outside the classroom, free from the pressure of time and the strictness of the given topic, the students will certainly feel freer and more motivated to write whatever and whenever they like. Raimes (1983) notes, 'When people write every day, for their own eyes and not to be judged by another, they often find that they can write more and more each day. Their fluency increases. They labor less over each word' (p.90). In this way, journal writing may be an ideal way to do this.

Another rationale is that writing is so rare in the classroom that my students do not perceive writing skills as valuable, that is why I started introduce journal writing. The prime benefit of journal writing is to provide students with an opportunity to practice writing skills but also to express their own opinions on language learning and to reflect on their own language learning. Through journal writing learners have more time to communicate with others to learn about their backgrounds, interests and needs, to share information and experiences. Journal writing not only opens new channels of communication, but it also provides a natural context for language and literacy development. Teachers have very little time to spend with individual learners in the classroom, and journal writing extends that time.

In addition, writing is not an isolated skill, but is closely related to other skills such as listening or reading. If we do believe that extensive reading and extensive listening can help us much in learning a foreign language, why cannot extensive writing so? Students do not learn much just by sitting in the class. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily life. Journal writing will be an ideal way to do this because when writing for pleasure, students can use what they have learnt in the class to express, explain and discuss what is really going on in their life and what they think and feel about it. 'If you are writing on a topic about which you feel you have something worthwhile or interesting to say, the process of writing can be absorbing and enjoyable' (Ur, 1996, p. 169).

Journal writing also gives students the opportunities to exchange opinions in writing with their teacher. Some of these things they would never have said out loud to teachers. Learning to write is a life-long job and writing skills cannot be learned overnight. 'It is as well to remember, though, that whatever the enthusiasm and commitment generated by a process approach, neither teachers nor students should expect sudden miracles to occur, such that elementary students suddenly become intermediate level writers as a result of the activities they have engaged in. Indeed, it would be unreasonable to expect such transformations to occur' (White & Arndt, 1992, p.6). Most of the time when we teach students writing, we teach them how to write rather than what to write, so the real purposes of writing are up to the students. Those real purposes, as Jacobs and Renandya (1999) have written, 'means that writing is being done to communicate something to a real audience or that students are reading for entertainment or to learn something which are in their genuine interest. The opposite of real learning is when students read or write because their teachers have assigned them to do so. The only audience for their writing will be the teacher who is mainly interested in correctness, not ideas...' (p.106). Journal writing allows students to decide not only the purposes, but also the audience for themselves, and thus, when becoming a habit, it will give them the power to communicate effectively through writing whenever that power is needed in their real life.

Since journal writing is chiefly an outside classroom activity many people are worried that mistakes and errors are not corrected by the teacher. But this worry is not justified as Raimes (1983) explains, 'See errors as friends and not as enemies to be conquered; they tell you a great deal about your students and their learning process' (p. 22). Indeed, treating any piece of writing primarily as a source of language errors misses the point of our approach. Grammar is important – but as a tool, a means, not as an end in itself. Evidence has proved that focusing on language errors in writing improves neither grammatical accuracy nor writing fluency. The willingness to use the language in a given situation can often be of greater importance for understanding and communication than grammatical correctness. It is therefore advisable to include freer forms of activities from a very early stage in language learning, even if it means that not everything is formally correct. Grammatical competence will normally develop as learning progresses. Journal writing, as a 'freer form' of writing practice, therefore, can result in both better fluency and accuracy without much of intervention from the teacher.

Finally, journal writing can stimulate learners to write with greater confidence, to increase confidence in their writing skills and to deepen understanding of themselves. Not only do learners develop their self-confidence, they also develop autonomy, which is crucial to language learning. But in spite of all the existing theories on successful writing and all the optimistic research evidence on this topic that have been collected around the world, very few studies of this kind have been conducted in Vietnam where most of the writing classes are still being taught in the traditional way in which the teacher just gives the students a list of words, some grammatical explanations, then asks them to write some sentences or some paragraphs, and then makes some corrections. That is another reason why this research is necessary. Once it is carried out and proves to be fruitful, a new and useful strategy for teaching and learning writing in Vietnamese classes can be widely introduced.

III. Literature Review

Learning how to write in English is important for many learners. Writing is essentially a creative process and good writers must learn to communicate their ideas clearly to an unseen audience. This takes a lot of practice. Learners, however, usually do not have enough time to practice writing in class as Chandrasegaran (2002) points out, 'A problem to be expected in the classroom writing is that some students take much longer than others to write the required parts of the essay. Many never finish their writing in class ... one solution is to ask students to write at home' (p. 14). Journal writing is one of those ways. Through journal writing, learners can increase their awareness of how they learn and, hence, deepen their control over their own development. Journal writing also offers learners safe, discreet places for reflection but they can also be effective tools for processing input and dealing with language related problems. Journal writing is an ideal way to do this because when writing for pleasure, students can use what they have learned in class to express, explain and discuss what is going on in their lives and what they think and feel about it.

Another point is that 'Writing should not be thought of as a process where organization of ideas is a preliminary and finite stage, but rather where on-going re-organization is the keyword' (White & Arndt, 1992, p.79). Writers typically begin with activities that allow them to develop ideas about the topic they will write about (rehearsal activities), but then they let the ideas change and develop as a consequence of expressing them (Long & Richards, 1987, p.257). These are crucial because writing is not just a matter of recording information; it is an instrument of thought. Elbow (1973) puts it like this:

'It is simply a fact that most of the time you can't find the right words till you know exactly what you are saying, but you can't know exactly what you are saying, until you find the right words. The consequence is that you must start by writing the wrong meanings in the wrong words, but keep writing till you get the right meanings in the right words. Only at the end will you know what you are saying' (p. 26).

Journal writing also provides the learners with a vehicle for real and on-going communication. They get to know each other better. It gives a chance for individual student – teacher communication. 'Thus the purpose of the journal writing is a kind of on-going written exchange of thoughts and ideas based upon the experience and reflection of reader and writer' (White and Arndt, p.63).

What is more, journal writing does give students a non-threatening way to communicate. It is less public than speaking in front of the class, and students do not have to worry about grammar and spelling errors. Ur (1996, p. 169) claims, 'Our responses to free writing, even if this is full of mistakes, can mitigate discouragement and encourage learning.' As a result, shy students who can seldom get to speak sometimes find journals a more comfortable means of communication and become 'talkative'. As journal writing focuses on meaning rather than form, grades are not given and grammar errors are not corrected, learners are eager to begin writing. This lets them express themselves in writing without the pressure they typically have when doing assignments. It ensures that they have one positive writing experience each

day. It is a real help in developing oral language and speaking skill in learners. It creates an opportunity for teachers to talk to their learners. This is also the time for students to exchange their ideas about what they have written in terms of idea development and it helps to revise their writing in terms of language use. If students have problems, they can talk to their teachers with total confidence. It is also a means of getting to know the learners outside the school atmosphere, their likes, dislikes and dreams.

IV. Procedures

During the first week, students were asked to write a paragraph about 120 words in 45 minutes in class. The topic was "*Your Daily Activities*". Students had to do the pre-test within a strict time limit. The aim was that the researcher wanted to know exactly how much the students could write in a limited amount of time and how much the students were interested in writing, (The assumption is that the more they showed interest, the more motivated they were) and how well the students expressed themselves through writing. Students then had to hand in their papers whether they finished or not.

A questionnaire was administered right after the Pre-test in order to get students' attitudes toward journal writing. All the questions focused on the investigation of students' interest in writing journals. After twelve weeks, another questionnaire was distributed to students to see how interested the students were about journal writing after the experiment. Students were told to be as honest as possible in filling out the questionnaire.

From the second week on, the students were asked to write journal entries in class in addition to the normal writing activities they usually had at home. They were also given a brief and careful explanation as to what they had to do when writing a journal. This was to make sure that all students understood properly the way to write a journal. This was necessary because they had never done this before. The researcher let them write whatever they wanted to write and whenever they felt like writing. The topics were things happening at schools, at home, something of common interest or something private. The writing was sometimes a paragraph, some sentences, a conversation, or something else. No matter what it was, writing was kept up every day. In order to motivate students to write and have confidence to write, the researcher explained to them that their journal writing would have nothing to do with the teacher's assessments.

Besides daily entries, students would be asked to write on some open-ended topics given by the researcher. These topics gave them the freedom to choose aspects of their interest. These topics made them feel excited and motivated them to write and brought life to their writing. Formal interviews were also carried out between the researcher and students in groups in order to find out whether things were going on all right during the research, and whether students still had a prolonged interest in the activities. Fortunately, the results of the interview were positive.

Each week, students were asked to select one best piece of their journal writing and gave it to the researcher for reading. The researcher read and kept a record of each member's progress in terms of learner-generated writing confidence, encouraging autonomy which is crucial to the language learners, communication and the length of writing. As usual, the researcher returned the journal writing back to the students weekly together with careful, friendly comments or responses on them. Advice was also given to individuals as another kind of treatment or encouragement.

At first, the students did not like writing English and most of them felt uneasy when writing English. This is not surprising because, as mentioned above, most of the students had difficulties in writing and they were afraid of making mistakes. What is more, many of them never wrote outside the classroom because according to White & Arndt (1992) the purpose of writing which is produced in a school or institutional setting, however, is unfortunately sometimes little more than to exercise or demonstrate certain language skills, or – in some EFL context – to reinforce the learning of the language itself (p.49). So they did not know whether journal writing was a safe way to communicate with their partner and their teacher or not.

Later on, students began to like this new method of learning writing and they did not feel afraid of writing any more. They began to write outside the classroom regularly and were satisfied with their writing skill. Only a small group said that they needed more time to get familiar with this new method of learning writing. Students were making good progress during the experiment. Their fluency increased and they labored less over each word. Their writing skills were much improved and their writing speed was faster. In the same length of time, students wrote much longer in the post-test writing. This indicates that they became more interested and motivated in journal writing.

V. Limitations

Although the research process was meticulously planned and executed, several noteworthy limitations emerged during its implementation. First and foremost, a significant challenge arose from the tendency of some students to produce lengthy yet incomprehensible textual submissions. Despite their evident effort, the lack of clarity and coherence in their writing rendered it exceedingly difficult to accurately evaluate their progress and grasp the depth of their understanding.

Secondly, another obstacle encountered was the reluctance of certain students to actively engage in journal writing activities. This reluctance stemmed from various factors, including a lack of patience and a tendency to become disinterested in repetitive tasks. Additionally, some students harbored reservations about sharing their personal experiences and reflections with their peers, fearing potential judgment or scrutiny. This reluctance to participate not only hindered the efficacy of the research process but also posed a significant challenge to fostering a collaborative and open learning environment.

Furthermore, it became apparent that the implementation of journal writing as a pedagogical tool necessitated a substantial investment of time and effort from the instructor. The task of thoroughly reading and meaningfully responding to each student's journal entry demanded a significant allocation of the teacher's time and attention. Given the frequency with which students were expected to write, especially if daily entries were required, the time commitment required from the teacher grew exponentially. This aspect of the process underscored the importance of careful consideration and strategic planning in integrating journal writing into

the curriculum, ensuring that it remains a valuable and feasible instructional tool for both students and educators alike.

VI. Conclusion

Expanding upon your points, we can delve deeper into the reasons behind students' reluctance to write in Vietnam and how journal writing can address these issues:

Firstly, the predominant focus on language mechanics rather than meaningful communication in writing instruction often leaves students feeling disconnected from the writing process. This emphasis on form over content can stifle creativity and inhibit genuine expression, leading to disinterest and minimal engagement.

Secondly, the compartmentalization of writing instruction, where it is taught in isolation from other language skills, further exacerbates students' disengagement. When writing is treated as a standalone activity rather than an integrated component of language acquisition, students struggle to see its relevance and practical application in real-world contexts.

Additionally, the pervasive control exerted by teachers over students' writing exacerbates feelings of constraint and apprehension. The lack of autonomy and opportunity for self-expression can dampen students' enthusiasm and inhibit their willingness to take risks and experiment with language.

Introducing journal writing as a pedagogical approach offers a multifaceted solution to these challenges. By shifting the focus from linguistic accuracy to the communication of meaning, journal writing provides students with a platform to freely express their thoughts, ideas, and experiences. This emphasis on meaning empowers students to engage more deeply with the writing process and fosters a sense of ownership and agency over their writing.

Furthermore, the informal nature of journal writing removes the pressure of assessment and evaluation, allowing students to write more authentically and without fear of judgment. This freedom encourages risk-taking and promotes a growth mindset, where mistakes are viewed as opportunities for learning and growth rather than failures.

Moreover, journal writing serves as a valuable tool for reflection and self-assessment, enabling students to document their learning journey and identify areas for improvement. By encouraging students to articulate their thoughts and questions, journal writing facilitates meaningful dialogue and collaboration between students and teachers, fostering a supportive and dynamic learning environment.

Ultimately, by incorporating journal writing into the curriculum, educators can empower students to become more confident, motivated, and proficient writers, equipping them with the skills and mindset necessary for success both in the classroom and beyond.

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