

Using Journals in the ESL Classroom

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Introduction

Teaching writing to ESL students may be problematic for various reasons. For instance, many students have mental blocks against writing. This may be because they perceive writing to be a meaningless task. Some may fear their teachers' close examination and correction of their writing. Others may be at a loss to write because they feel they lack lexical and syntactic control of the language.

In addition to overcoming students' mental blocks, ESL teachers often have to deal with their students' preoccupation with grammar, spelling and punctuation. These students perceive such mechanics to be so important that they get bogged down and forget the communicative functions of language. In such cases, ESL teachers need to encourage their students to write for a specific audience and purpose so that getting their message across to this audience becomes their primary aim in writing.

Journal writing may be used in the ESL classroom to overcome mental blocks and to encourage writing for communicative purposes. In journal writing, students record in a notebook their spontaneous thoughts on any topic. Journals are not as personal as diaries because the writers know that someone will read and probably respond to their entries.

The Theoretical Underpinnings

The use of journals may be attributed to the process approach to writing. Documented studies of several writing projects in the United States indicate that the process approach is more effective than the traditional one in teaching writing (Pritchard, 1987).

The traditional approach emphasizes the written product, especially the mechanics of the language. Students write to demonstrate their competence in thinking, organization and exposition. Their ideas are assumed to be all thought out and the organization all laid out. However, research has proved these assumptions wrong. In looking at how good writers write, researchers have found writing to be

a medium of intellectual discovery, as echoed in E.M. Forster's words: "How do I know what I write until I see what I have to say?" (quoted in Murray, 1982: 86).

In contrast, the process approach emphasizes the development of a composition. Journal writing may be used as a prewriting strategy to develop a composition. It is characterized by free-writing in expressive language for a specified audience. To "free-write," writers simply force themselves to write continuously because

free-writing makes writing easier by helping you with the root psychological or existential difficulty in writing: finding words in your head and putting them down on a blank piece of paper. So much writing time and energy is spent not writing: wondering, worrying, crossing out, having second, third, and fourth thoughts.

(Elbow, 1981: 14)

Journals help writers to formulate their thoughts because of the highly personal, expressive language used. Expressive language, the language we use to make known to others our ideas, helps writers to move into the other two functions of languages, viz, transactional and poetic functions.

"Transactional writing is language that gets things done, language is a means. Poetic language is ... an end in itself" (Britton, 1982: 107), helping to shape language into art. Clearly, expressive writing is the most important but schools traditionally emphasize transactional writing (Britton, 1977).

Journals motivate student writers to write for their audience since the entries are shared with peers and teachers. This sharing is important, given that the primary purpose in writing is to communicate. The audience responds with encouraging comments about how effective the message is and how the writers can improve their writing. Gaskins (1982: 859) gives suggestions for responses, eg.

"I was really interested in ... I wish you said more about that",

"It was unclear when you said... Tell us what you meant to say. Let's see how you might want to add or change to make it clear."

Thus teachers only comment on, and do not correct: the journals. The students are encouraged to concentrate on writing without worrying about form or correctness. Instead, they should be concerned about making writing habitual and natural by tying writing to firsthand experience (Moffett, 1981).

In other words, journal writing allows students to relate verbal expression to its deeper roots in feelings and thought. A journal allows students "more freedom to explore the ideas of a discipline from a personal vantage point, and therefore greater opportunity to learn without the anxiety of anticipating formal expectations that are made to seem more important than the search for meaning" (Knoblauch and Brannon, 1983: 470). Clearly, journal writing is useful for self-discovery and expression as well as for clarifying ideas for the writers and others.

Although teachers have found journal writing effective in teaching writing at tertiary level (eg. Despain used it in China and Marsella in the Hawaii Writing Workshop, by personal communication), documented studies are few. In reviewing the literature, we found that journal writing is not usually the focus of a study but rather presented as a pre-writing strategy for generating good final products (Langer and Applebee, 1985; Rohman, 1965). Journals have also been recommended as an intervention treatment to remove obstacles in revising writing (Della-Pina and Endo, 1977).

Methodology

We used journal writing to complement a writing programme for undergraduates, most of whom were intermediate ESL learners. The students attended four different courses at the National University of Singapore and the Nanyang Technological Institute.

The students kept a notebook in which they wrote during class. Generally, they were given 10-15 minutes during class to write in their journals. We deliberately gave minimal instructions to the students for journal writing. Sometimes they wrote about anything they wished. At other times, we wanted to obtain their ideas or opinions, eg. about a class discussion or about their ways of writing. Then, we gave them stimulus words or phrases, eg. "Abortion..." and "How I write in English and in Chinese."

The students also determined the tone of their journals, i.e. each student directed the course of the dialogue and the relationship which evolved between him/her and us. If a student seemed to prefer a formal impersonal relationship, we maintained it. If on the other hand a student adopted an informal personal style, we responded accordingly.

Our students wrote varying amounts. Some students were more prolific than others and consistently wrote many pages. However, we did not push the slower ones to write faster or more. Each wrote at his/her own pace. We encouraged the students to free-write, but noticed that few students did this, perhaps because most of them were so used to editing their thoughts while writing that they could not break the habit.

In our responses, though, we "free-wrote", reacting to the meaning of students' entries. Our responses ranged from a few lines to a few pages. We tried to build an approving atmosphere and show interest in what the students had written. For example, in responding to Samy's frustrations over shifts in language policies, one of us wrote:

Pretty strong language here. Yes, I too am sometimes frustrated at the frequent changing of policies... .Do you think that there should be a second language requirement at all? What is it trying to achieve? Is this policy succeeding in its time?

We responded without evaluating or correcting the student's writing. However, some students specifically asked for feedback on the product features of their writing. For these students, we underlined their errors for them to correct.

Some Benefits of Using Journals

When we asked our students to keep journals, we found some encouraging results. These results show that journal writing is beneficial to both students and teachers.

a) Improved Writing

We found that journal writing helped our students to become better writers because good writing practices were promoted. Such practices resulted in students writing more, using expressive language, experiencing a sense of the audience and seeing different purposes for their writing.

Since students learn to write "above all by writing" (Britton, 1982: 10), journal writing is beneficial because it makes students write more. Several students who realized this wrote, "I can practise English by writing" and "practise my sentence construction and learn how to organise ideas in different paragraphs." As Jim put it, "*journal writing made us do quite some writings..., without formally gives us a title to start with. It should be generally favourable as everyone seems to write more without really being pushed to write an essay.*"

Because they tended to use expressive language, our students also found that they could "practise our brain in thinking." i.e. learn to think, thus generating ideas for writing. In Choo's words.

"... I discover, if we take the trouble of writing down an idea or thought, it might be developed into something big enough which will benefit us."

Students who became better at free-writing learned that they could clear their minds and express themselves better if they put down on paper all their first thoughts, and later worried about what they wrote, deleting whatever was not necessary. Then they put down second thoughts. Describing his thinking on paper, Koh stated:

While I was writing, suddenly it strike me that these seems irrelevant, so I have to cross out this part which I have spent about 15 minutes on it.

Tong also discovered that, in writing he

Think about the gramme (sic), spelling, sentence construction and so on. These waste me a lot of times. End up, my essay is not as same as what I think. I am not satisfy (sic) after I completed the essay.

This was an important discovery as it is the process of generating ideas for writing that students should think about and not the mechanics. This discovery helped Tong to become less preoccupied with the product features of his writing.

Journals also helped our students improve their writing because they enjoyed a sense of their audience. They consciously wrote to communicate with us through their journals. Since we responded to the content communicated rather than correct the errors, they enjoyed a certain freedom not usually found in the writing they did for their other subjects.

Journal writing helped our students to see different purposes for writing other than for passing examinations (which unfortunately remains the main, if not the only, aim of most students' writing). Or students noted that they wrote to fulfill other purposes, eg. "*to convey my idea to someone else.*" "*express my feelings, especially when I am sad*" and "*express for certain topics.*" One student even used his journal as an outlet for his creative short story for the teacher to comment on.

Over time, our students learned to communicate feelings, thoughts and information effectively because, encouraged by audience response, they began to concentrate on the meaning rather than the form of the message. Thus, journal writing "*is a very good practice to improve (their) writing.*"

b) Individualized Instruction and Feedback

The journals helped us to meet our students' individual needs easily. The journal gave each student an avenue to ask specific questions about anything he/she was unsure about. Admittedly, error analyses of students' writing or teacher-student conferences may be just as useful in diagnosing

students' weaknesses. However, they are often not practical because they are time-consuming. With our constraints of time and class size, we found journals to be more convenient in diagnosing and meeting students' individual needs, thereby helping us to individualize instruction and feedback.

Students asked about spelling (eg. "... *the word medicore....have I spelt it correctly?*"; vocabulary (eg. "*What is the usage of respect and aspect when they concern about areas?*" and "*Can I use prudent to describe a person's character?*"); and grammar and usage (eg. *After some words like see, feel....is it compulsory that we must use present tense?*" and "*In the if-clause, is it impossible for us to use present continuous tense?*").

Besides specific questions on these areas, some students asked for general advice on how to improve their language skills. Samy asked, "*Could you please recommend me any good books about English grammar and usage?*".

Choo wrote:

...are there any specific effective ways of improving our writing in English? I mean specific because we have heard a lot of those general ways: Read more, practise more. I know that they are right but they sound so general and simple that we don't know exactly what to do.

Another way that journals helped to uncover individual needs was when students queried our feedback on other written work. For example, Hong asked:

In my composition, there is one part when I was complaining about the lecturers, I used: "*For e.g., they gave wrong formulae. The teaching methods that the lecturers used are not as interesting as I thought. As all of these thoughts, actions were happened in the past, why used and gave are use incorrectly?*"

With the journal, our students found that they could get answers to such questions without having to spend extra time outside class, to speak face-to-face to us (which some students may perceive to be threatening) or to brave their classmates' impatience or ridicule. Hence, they could clear their doubts about grammar and usage.

c) *Better Teacher-student Rapport*

Journal writing helped us build rapport with our students because they could write whatever they felt, knowing that their views and problems were taken seriously. Since almost anything goes in journal writing, our students were not afraid of revealing their true feelings or being reprimanded for disrespect. Swee expressed this aptly when she wrote, "*We could express our dissatisfaction here (in the journal) without getting into any trouble.*"

Since they were encouraged to express themselves freely, some students were frank in expressing their negative feelings about their English classes. Such negative feelings had to be dealt with quickly for if allowed to fester, they could have resulted in lack of motivation to learn, or worse, in disruptive behaviour.

For example, Samy's attitude towards his English classes became clear when he wrote:

We have been detained here because of to pass English Language exam. I think that is our priority - who cares how much we learn- the rest-to understand lectures, take notes

and others can learn later, how about if people like me who get through to the 3rd year but have to give up my degree because I still not fulfill English requirement?

Consequently, he could be encouraged to work hard, to ensure that he did fulfill the English requirement.

The journals helped build rapport because the students also used their journals to discuss personal problems like interpersonal conflict with classmates, relationship problems with boyfriends, feelings of inferiority ("*as I am a Chinese-stream student*"), as well as difficulties in adjusting to university life. The students who wrote about these generally asked for advice on how to cope. In expressing their deepest emotions, the students took us into their confidence, thereby allowing us to become close to them. Interestingly, the quiet and shy students tended to be the most open in confiding their feelings.

These examples show clearly how journal writing builds rapport and may help to change attitudes and increase motivation.

d) Improved Classroom Management

When our students expressed their feelings about the way we conducted our lessons, we received valuable feedback. As a result, we could modify our lessons and classroom practices. For example, Gwee commented on how oral exercises were being done in the classroom, suggesting that "*it would be better if you can go through the question one by one instead of asking we all to answer according to our sitting position.*"

Choo commented on groupwork:

I still don't like the idea of producing a piece of written work by a group of people although I don't mind discussing it with them. It's because there are so many ways of expressing an idea. I (We) find it difficult to compromise (agree) with each other and come out with a piece of work. It's really much more difficult than you would imagine!

Not all comments were negative, though. For example, Swee wrote

I like the lessons on the group discussions about a certain subject or case...I wish to have more of such lessons on reading over our own writings and evaluation on others' work. Having a chance to look at the other's work, I am enable to learn from the good writings of others.

With such feedback on the content and the management of lessons, we were better able to tailor lessons more specifically and effectively for our students. As can be seen from the examples, journals allow students to comment on their teachers. This is uncommon because the unequal power relationship in many classrooms deters students from questioning their teachers.

A Few Closing Thoughts

Journal writing can be taxing for the teacher because of the time needed to read and respond to students' entries, especially if classes are large. However, since the teacher "free-writes" and does not correct the student's writing, responding to journal entries is not as intimidating as many think. Also,

if class size prevents the teacher from responding to every single journal entry, the teacher can respond to selected entries only. In addition, how often journal writing is done in class is completely up to the teacher.

For those who favour teacher-student conferences, journals may be a useful complement. With the better rapport engendered by journal writing and the questions that students may ask in their journals, teacher-student conferences may become more productive. Students may be encouraged to ask more questions and to reflect more on their writing during these conferences. For the reticent student, the written dialogue that has gone on between teacher and student in journals may help to make the face-to-face interaction of conferences more natural.

Journal writing is an economical and easily administered tool with potentially powerful effects. No sophisticated equipment is necessary - only a notebook. No special training is required to apply it. Given its efficacy, journal writing can effectively complement any writing programme for ESL students at all levels. As Samy put it, "I'm glad to have this type of book. I think every teacher or tutor should obtain one in order to understand students' problems."

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