

THE IMPACT OF JOURNAL WRITING ON THE CORRECT USE OF GRAMMAR AMONG EFL STUDENTS OF RAFSANJAN VALI-E-ASR UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Writing is a complex process which involves different factors, and is an essential and necessary skill for ESL/EFL students. Therefore writing assignments should be an integral part of any curriculum. One aspect of good writing is good knowledge of grammar. According to the proponents of process writing, journal writing can be an effective method in the teaching of writing to non native students. Many studies argue that textbooks exaggerate the importance of grammar. These studies conclude that what all students, native or nonnative, need is more actual practice in writing, not actual grammar instruction. In this interventional study, 40 university students ranging in ages from 23 to 35 years, majoring in English language at Vali-e-Asr University of Rafsanjan, Iran were selected as the study subjects. Half of the students were randomly assigned to the control group, and the other half to the experimental group. At the start a test of writing was given to all the students. The control group received the regular class instruction, but the experimental group was instructed to keep a journal and write at least fifteen journal entries during the remaining period of the school term. After the two month period, another test of writing was given to both the control and experimental group. Each of the tests (pre-test and post-test) were scored by four different university instructors and finally reviewed by the researcher. The grammatical errors were highlighted and marked to evaluate the prevalence of grammatical errors and make comparison of these errors between the two groups. The results of the two tests were analyzed using a paired t-test. Results indicate that the students who had participated in the journal writing experiment had indeed gone through a process of grammar acquisition by themselves ($p < 0.05$) compared with the control group. As they had not received any form of grammar instruction during the term it was assumed that journal writing by itself had helped them correct their grammatical mistakes. It can be concluded that EFL students can benefit and learn the skill of writing better when they go through a free writing task such as journal writing. Composition teachers are therefore advised to include such activities in their teaching . Considering these points, further investigation in the use of and potential advantages of journal writing along with recognition of the pitfalls as well as developing effective strategies for avoiding these pitfalls seem necessary.

Introduction

As many composition instructors agree, compared with the native writers, L2 writers and speakers have more problems with writing and these problems not only detract from the content of their writing but also damage the esthetic and harmony of their essays (Williams, 2001). It is believed that compared to native writers, EFL and ESL students have more problems in the area of writing fluency, misuse of vocabulary, ineffectiveness and grammatical and spelling errors. But researchers believe that the key to writing fluency and writing development is encouraging ESL/EFL learners to write as often and as much as possible. Ammon (1985) has come to the conclusion that success in helping learners learn to write in ESL hinges primarily on the use of instructional activities that are rich in opportunities for exposure to, production of, and reflection on English discourse. Such activities include frequent writing, with guidance and feedback, on topics of personal interest. Therefore language instructors must create opportunities where learners spontaneously write with purpose for a real audience.

The writing process consists of three levels, a resource level, a process level, and a control level. Journal writing is a process that involves all three levels. Initially, the linguistic and general knowledge and skill of the students become involved and the process of writing begins; this level then interacts with the task which the student has designed and in effect is in control of his or her writing. This mode of writing is believed to give the learners more power to control their own writing and encourage them to write freely and with less anxiety. Elbow (1999) enthusiastically advocates journal writing and personal essays as tasks in which students can write freely and uncritically.

Researchers such as Zamel (1982, 1983, 1992), believe that in order for ESL students to become effective writers, they need to generate “comprehensible output.” One way of getting this is extensive journal writing in the second language. Journal writing is basically writing regularly in a writing log about daily experiences, and recording thoughts and observations, reflections and perceptions on different topics. It is a more focused and systematic way of recording things as the writer develops ideas on a specific topic or event. These entries could be factual information on inter or intrapersonal relationships and of course reflections on what has been learned in the traditional and non-traditional classroom. The students are usually encouraged to use creative writing techniques in their journals. As Dass (2003) emphasizes the communicative and interactive nature of writing makes it most appropriate to be taught as communication and creates language learning opportunities. In fact in L2 writing, composition teachers are instructed to encourage ESL learners to communicate with their instructors via their papers and write as often and as much as possible and create opportunities where students spontaneously write with purpose

for a real audience, which in the case of journal entries, is their instructor. Dymont and O'connell (2003) have encouraged their students to use drawing, songs/poetry, maps, and other optional materials such as colored pencils, paint, crayons and tape to augment their journal entries and to make journal more fun.

Journal writing helps students reflect on their experiences and for this reason, it has become an increasingly popular tool used in many academic fields, such as therapeutic recreation, psychology, literature, teacher education, sociology, etc (Dymont & O'Connell, 2003). Researchers agree that journal writing is a free and undemanding type of writing which allows ideas and opinions that have been locked in the mind to come to the surface and become free and flowing. Krashen (1998) believes journal writers don't have to struggle to keep everything in their minds and by getting their thoughts down on the page quickly without the usual monitors regarding form and correctness, their minds are free to concentrate on the concerns of the content e.

Journal writing is viewed as a process approach to writing and as Shahrina (2006) believes, in such classrooms writing is essentially learnt, not taught. And the teacher becomes a facilitator who exercises the writing skills and draws out the learners' potential. This approach to writing has also been adopted by *Humanistic* schools of teaching which emphasize education of the *whole person* and is aimed at helping learners develop a set of skills (Nunan, 1999). In the product approach writers use models and imitations for writing which Nunan calls "reproductive language work," (p. 274) but the process approach, as its name suggests focuses on the steps involved in writing not the final product. Garmon (1998) reports that journal writing helps instructors know and understand their students better and thereby tailor instruction to meet their particular needs. Also, it gives students an opportunity to grapple with the ideas presented in class and it promotes self reflection, enhances self-knowledge and promotes students' learning.

Ediger (2001) has identified the following advantages of journal writing:

- (1) Each student has ownership of his/her written script. The student then is the chooser as to what to write about.
- (2) Students may feel that writing is individualized in that each may select, organize, and sequence content to write about.
- (3) Writing is personalized in that the learner writes about feelings, subject matter, attitudes, and values; about what is prized in the social studies curriculum.
- (4) Learners may choose to write in an intrapersonal or interpersonal manner.
- (5) Self evaluation of the journal is possible as well as the use of qualified adults to assess journal entries.

Yinger (1985) also maintains that journal writing allows the students to improve their writing by: 1) focusing on processes rather than on products, 2) emphasizing expressive and personal aspects and 3) serving as a record of thoughts and expression that is available for rereading. Journal writing is also beneficial to teachers as it improves the relationship between the students and teachers and allows teachers to get a glimpse of what goes on in the mind of a student. Journal writing has been described as a process of “thinking aloud” on the paper. As one student in Mllynarczyk’s (1998) class wrote: “it is free writing. I wrote the first sentence and then I continued writing almost without any stops.” Another student wrote: “I didn’t decide. It came by itself” (p. 45). Mllynarczyk elaborates: “by writing freely, without focusing on form or organization, these writers had a chance to experiment with language and follow their own ideas” (p. 45).

By motivating the students to write about their own interests and the subjects that are relevant to their lives, we can help them move beyond personal subjects and get on with larger issues in their writing. Language learning, as has been shown by many studies, is a complex process. In this process, the students’ expectations, values, and beliefs play an important role. We cannot just rely on the linguistic input and output of the classroom; we have to tap the learners’ selves and hear what they are thinking. What better way of finding this out than by asking them to write regularly in their journals?

The Problems with Journal Writing

As Dymont and O’Connell (2003) have stated, journal writing has problems too, such as: “writing for the teacher, overuse in the academic programmes, and negative student perceptions of both the content and the process of journal writing” (p. 3). Other negative aspects of journaling worth mentioning could be the fact that it may be used by the students to gain favor from the teacher, to attack others and there are also the problems of evaluation. Another problem in the writings of daily journals is the fact that, as Anderson (1993) has argued, often students are not provided with guidance or instruction so as to journal effectively, but are expected to make connections to theory and critically reflect on their experiences.

The Purpose of the Study

There have been many studies regarding the role of journal writing in helping students become more competent and motivated writers. Journal writing has also been used with nontraditional students and women who have returned to school, but according to our research there has never been a study done on the effect of journal writing on improving the grammatical ability of ESL/EFL students. We hypothesize

that if given choice and freedom about topics and writing style, EFL students might be able to improve their writing ability, and in the process, figure out the correct use of English grammar.

Considering the fact that almost all ESL/EFL students are taught English grammar from the beginning, in this study we attempted to study whether journal writing could be used as a self learning method and help students figure out the grammar rules which they had been taught in the past on their own and start a process of self learning without being aware of it. The purpose of this interventional study was to investigate how journal writing affects the students' writing in the long run and whether allowing the students to design and write about their own topics has any effect on grammar acquisition in particular and writing ability in general.

Method

Forty university students majoring in English participated in this study. The majority of them were women (98%), with an age range of 23-35 years (mean 23 years). In order to understand the role and impact of journal writing on writing ability and grammatical improvement, a pre-test was given to all the participants. The control group received the regular class instructions, but the experimental group was instructed to keep a journal and write at least fifteen journal entries during the remaining period of the school term. They were free to choose their own themes and were not limited in any way on how to conduct their journal writing. The students were required to produce at least 15 one page entries. Since giving a grade to the journals adds value to them and establishes their importance and also to ensure the full participation of all the experimental group participants, on the suggestion of their instructors, the journal entries were weighted as 15% (which was an average that other studies have established) of the final grade. However, the strength of journal entries was on the participants' motivation and engagement in their own learning process. The journal entries were not commented on and the students did not receive any form of feedback on their entries as this would have been a form of extra instruction. Also by this method all judgment and criticism was withheld. After the two month period, another test of writing was given to both the control and experimental groups.

The two tests (pre-test and post-test) were copied and given to four different university instructors to be evaluated and scored according to the grading scale of Baily and Brown 1984. Each of the tests (pre-test and post-test of each of the participants) was reviewed by the researcher and the gross and obvious grammatical errors were highlighted and marked to evaluate the prevalence of grammatical errors and make comparison of these errors between the two groups. The results of the two tests and the frequency of the grammatical errors were analyzed using a paired t-test.

Results and Discussion

The results, as indicated by the tables below, showed that according to our hypothesis, journal writing, as many studies have also shown, improves the writing ability of students and gives them self confidence and motivation to write in the second language. The results of the paired t-test showed that the students who had gone through the journal writing experiment received higher scores from the independent scorers. Also the students who had gone through the journal writing process seemed to have gone through a self learning process and significantly progressed in using correct grammar in their journal entries. As they showed fewer grammar errors in the post-test. As indicated in Table 1 the 80 control subjects' mean scores in the pre-test and post-test (the time interval between the pre-test and post-test for the control group was identical to that of the subjects who experienced the intervention), were 64.09 ± 24.87 (mean \pm SD) and 64.64 ± 25.40 , respectively. This difference is not statistically significant.

Table 1: Comparison of the Mean Scores of the Control Group in the Pre-test and Post-test

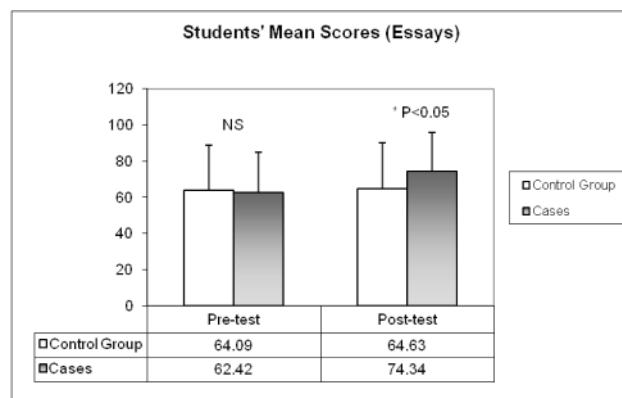
	Mean Scores	Standard Deviation (SD)	Results of the paired to test	No. of Subjects
Pre-test	64.0875	24.871	P=0.739 Non-Significant	80
Post-test	64.6375	25.398		80

Moving to the experimental group, the mean scores obtained by 64 cases (4 students who had not completed their journaling task, were dropped from the study) in the pre-test and post-test (before and after the intervention) were 62.44 ± 22.44 (mean \pm SD) and 74.34 ± 21.60 , respectively. These results are shown in Table 2. In this case, the difference that was observed is statistically significant ($P < 0.01$) indicating a higher score for those who had experienced journal writing. Due to fewer grammar mistakes and greater overall writing accuracy, the scores obtained by the experimental group were higher in the post test.

Table 2: Experimental Group Students' Mean Scores Before and After the Intervention

	Mean Scores	Standard Deviation (SD)	Results of the paired to test	No. of Subjects
Pre-test (Pre-intervention)	62.44	22.44	P<0.01 Significant	64
Post-test (Post-intervention)	74.34	21.60		64

Comparison of the mean scores of the control group and the experimental group in the pre-test did not reveal any statistically significant difference (64.09 ± 24.87 and 57.42 ± 24.44 for control group and experimental group respectively). This shows that both groups had the same level of English competency before the experiment. Also, the difference between the mean scores of the control group and experimental group (cases) in the post-test (64.63 ± 25.40 and 63.34 ± 21.60 in the tables below) was not statistically significant.



(NS= Not statistically significant)

Figure 1: Comparison of the mean scores of the control group and experimental group in the pre-test and post-test.

In Table 3, the mean frequency of grammatical errors in the pre-test and post-test of the control group are indicated. The scores in the pre-test and post-test were 5.25 ± 2.59 (mean \pm SD) and 5 ± 2.1 , respectively. This difference is not statistically significant.

Table 3: Comparison of the Mean Scores of Grammatical Errors of the Control Group in the pre- test and post-test

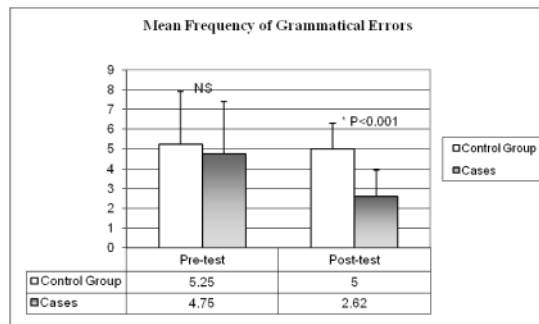
Test	Mean Scores	Standard Deviation (SD)	No. of Subjects	P-value
Pre-test	5.25	2.59	20	Non-Significant
Post-post	5	2.1	20	

As indicated in Table 4, the mean frequency of grammatical errors in the pre-test and post-test of the experimental group were 4.75 ± 2.65 (mean \pm SD) and 2.62 ± 1.31 , respectively. This difference is statistically significant ($P < 0.05$). the experimental group showed less grammatical errors in their post-test, whereas in the pre-test they had made almost the same amount of grammatical errors.

Table 4 : Comparison of the frequencies of grammatical errors of the experimental group in the pre-test and post-test

Intervention	Mean Scores	Standard Deviation (SD)	No. of Subjects	Results of the T-test
Pre-test	4.75	2.65	16	$P < 0.05$ * Significant
Post-post	2.62	1.31	16	

Concerning the frequency of grammatical errors, comparison of the control group and experimental group in the pre-test did not reveal any statistically significant difference (5.25 ± 2.59 and 4.75 ± 2.65 for the control and experimental group respectively). However, the difference between the mean scores of the control group and experimental group (cases) in the post-test (5 ± 2.1 and 2.62 ± 1.31 respectively) is statistically significant ($P < 0.001$).



Pre-test: Statistically significant ($P < 0.05$), post-test no statistically significant difference

Figure 2: Comparison of the mean frequency of the grammatical errors of the control group and experimental group in the pre-test and post-test

These data led us to the next level of our analysis. The frequency of grammatical errors of the control and experimental groups in the pre-test did not reveal any statistically significant difference (5.25 and 4.75 for the control and experimental groups respectively) which indicated that at the start of the study they had the

same level of grammatical knowledge. However, the difference between the mean scores of the control group and the experimental group in the post-test (5.2 and 2.62 respectively) showed a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.001$) indicating that although both groups had gone through the same academic instruction, after the time interval the experimental group had benefited from another source which in this case could be attributed to writing regular journal entries.

Problems and Limitations

One noticeable problem in this study was the fact that the participants seemed careless about their handwriting and spelling. Most of the students received a lower score not because of grammatical problems, but because they had not written as extensively as the scorer had anticipated. When an essay received a generally lower score, the scorers reported that the essays had lacked transitions and the arguments had not been fully supported. As one scorer argued, he could not give a high score to an essay in which the sentences contradicted each other even though there was no problem with the grammatical aspect of it. Another scorer who had given scores as low as zero (out of 100) explained that some sentences did not make any sense and the student had written Farsi words using English letters. Another scorer mentioned the reason for the low scores he awarded was the lack of coherence in the papers and that the arguments were completely irrelevant to the topic. If there had been no grammatical errors, the papers would have been scored based on whether or not the arguments were supported by examples. If they had been fully supported, the scores would have ranged from 70 to 80. Also bad and illegible handwriting as well as lack of general neatness seemed to be among major determinants of the scoring system. The scorers gave very low scores to those essays which were not clean and neat, even though the ideas and the overall argument were acceptable and, in a couple of essays, without any major grammatical errors. One essay for instance had no noticeable grammatical error, had stated its argument clearly, but received a score of 55 (out of 100) solely because the punctuation and handwriting were not according to the scorers' preference. One scorer mentioned that this student seemed to be impatient with the writing test and wanted to get it over with as soon as possible. Samples of some of these problems include the following which have been chosen from the actual pre and post-test essays. The grammatical errors have been indicated in bold letters.

1. -It is **very a lot** system....
2. -I think educational system of Iran totally wrong and not suitable for Iranian students (**lack of verb**)
3. -I **friendly** recommend you to make **you** decision
4. -you can help them and **happy** them

It appears EFL learners do not benefit from explicit grammar instruction as much as previously thought, or at least this is what our study to some extent indicates. It should be mentioned that the time interval between tests for both groups in our study was the same. The experimental group had not received any form of grammar instruction or feedback on their journals, but the control group which did not show any improvement in their grammatical abilities had received the regular class instruction which according to their instructor had included some form of grammar instruction.

Recommendations and Implications

Based on the findings obtained in this study and the literature about journal writing, we offer the following recommendations and hope that by implementing them in our composition classes, the instructors would be able to further involve the students in their own learning and follow learner- based curricula.

In this research, to prevent any bias in the study, we did not offer any feedback to our students and it seemed that what they needed most was validation of their efforts. So, we suggest that if educators want to use journal writing in their classes and capitalize on its potential, they must be willing to spend time and effort to offer the students feedback on their journal entries. Feedback will help the students find out their own weaknesses and strengths and challenge their writing techniques. Before the start of our study, we conducted a workshop to orient the students with the journaling processes and offered them samples of journal entries from other academic settings, and this seemed to help them a lot in understanding what is considered journal writing. Last but not least, all the educators must remember that the basic necessity in the art of journal writing is establishing trust between the journal writer and the journal reader. As Dymont and O'Connell (2003) have pointed out, "trust is a critical factor that influences student perceptions and behaviors of journal writing" (p. 5). Widdowson (cited in Zamel, 1983) has insisted that, "language teaching should allow for the capacity for making sense, for negotiating meaning, and for finding expression for new experiences" (p. 184). The language learning process, characterized as this way, parallels exactly the process of composing, so it is time for ESL teachers to see the value of journal writing in their classes.

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