

Considering the effect of Diary Writing on Improving Writing Skill: a Self-reflection Tool

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Abstract

Diary writing is a very effective tool for both students and teachers since this technique enables students to think on what they have learned, how they have learned it, what kind of difficulties they have when they need to write in English or what helps them to overcome these difficulties in the process of learning English. Furthermore, teachers can learn from students' diaries about their limitations and faults in writing and help them to remove them. They can also find out what teaching strategies students prefer the best and use them in their teaching. The purpose of this article is to discuss about diary writing used in the Course of Academic Writing for TEFL learners and analyse the effect of this approach on developing writing skill. The results revealed that diary writing as a tool for self-reflection can improve writing skill better than mere teacher written error correction.

Keywords: Academic writing; Diary writing; EFL; Self-reflection; Written error correction

Review of Literature

Developing writing skill is one of the most challenging issues in EFL. This skill is very complicated for EFL learners, so, teachers should search for a way to teach this skill properly. One of these approaches for teaching writing skill is self-reflection. According to Mann et al. (2009) reflection shares similarities with critical thinking. Boud et al. (1985) define reflection in the context of learning and focus more on one's personal experience as the object of reflection, as referring to "those intellectual and affective activities that individuals engage into explore their experience, which leads to new understanding and appreciations" (p. 19). Moon (1999) focuses more on the role of reflection and learning, and embeds reflection into the learning process. She explains reflection as "a form of mental processing with a purpose and/or anticipated outcome that is applied to relatively complex or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution" (p. 23). All three definitions emphasize purposeful critical analysis of knowledge and experience so as to gain deeper meaning and understanding.

Self-reflection as a topic of educational importance has resulted in the incorporation of reflection journals as learning tools that promote reflection into many curricula (Mann et al., 2009). Reflection journal writing is believed to enable students to critically review processes of their own learning and behaviors, and to understand their ability to transform their own learning strategies (Gleaves et al., 2008). The purposes of reflection journal writing involve: to critically review the

behaviors (e.g. strengths and weaknesses; learning styles and strategies) , learning of self and others, setting or tracking learning goals (i.e. how learning takes place), and exploring connections between knowledge that was learned and students' own ideas about them (Moon, 1999). It is believed that through reflecting and writing about new information or ideas, learners can better understand and remember them. Furthermore, connections between new information, ideas, prior or existing knowledge deepen learning (O'Rourke, 1998).

McCrinkle and Christensen (1995) explored the impact of reflection journal writing on cognitive processes and academic performances. Their findings show that Students who kept learning journals produce more sophisticated conceptions of learning, greater awareness of cognitive strategies, and demonstrated the construction of more complex and related knowledge structures when learning from text. They also performed significantly better on the final examination for the course. As Race (2002) says reflecting causes us to make sense of what we've learned, why we learned it, and how that particular increment of learning happens.

Reflection is useful when our learning has been unsuccessful – in such cases indeed reflection can often give us insights into what may have gone wrong with our learning, and how on a future occasion we might avoid these pitfalls. The reflective essay does not have any fixed format but it usually follows the structure of any other essay, mostly the formal one. That means the text of such an essay should consist of an introductory paragraph informing the reader about the topic. Then, there are 2-3 paragraphs where the author expresses his/her own opinions.

Diary, also called a journal, is a notebook where people can write anything they want such as their thoughts, ideas, feelings or experiences (Klimova, 2015).

Diaries also play an important role in the learning of languages. As Rubin (2003) points out, more successful learners are in control of their learning; they know what they are doing and what they want to achieve; they know when they make mistakes; and they know how to go about correcting them. In this process, teachers can help their students through allowing them to see their diaries, comment on them and make relevant suggestions. In their classes teachers can then employ the technique of scaffolding, a kind of support which would help students in their learning and overcoming their learning difficulties. Rubin (2003) proposes the following ways of using diaries in an effective way:

1. The teacher can look over each diary and make suggestions.
2. The teacher can ask peers to look over each other's diaries and make suggestions. This can be very efficient for a number of reasons (a) peers can often suggest other ways to address a problem,(b) peers can learn from the solutions of their fellow peers, and (c) the teacher may not have time to read all the diaries but learners can still get input this way.
3. After several diary assignments are in, learners can be asked to look through them and see what their own patterns of problems are and what their strategies for solving them are.
4. The teacher can look over the diaries and see what patterns of problems and solutions individual learners have and make suggestions.

The purpose of the present study was to evaluate whether reflection journal/Diary writing was effective in promoting writing achievement. It was hypothesized that self-reflection and academic achievement influenced each other interactively, i.e. students by looking back on how and what they have learned which results in them having better self-reflection skills; subsequently lead them to perform better in the classroom or on knowledge acquisition tests. Regarding the purpose of the study, the following research question was asked:

1. Is there any relationship between Diary writing as a self-reflective tool and writing achievement?

Methodology

Subjects

The participants for this study were 40 Iranian EFL learners majoring in English Language Teaching with an age range of 18-35. Students were chosen after assigning a writing task (pre-test) for having homogeneous groups. The researcher randomly assigned them as two control and experimental groups.

Instrumentation:

Two argumentative writing tasks in the pre-test and the post-test and a guideline for writing Diaries by Klimova (2015) were used.

Procedure:

TEFL students in their Course of Academic Writing during their Introductory Lesson of the course were asked to start writing diaries. They were given some guidelines (see Appendix A) on how they should proceed in writing their diaries, what format and content their diaries should have, i.e. they should be connected with their experience/s and feelings while learning English. Researcher as their teacher enrolled these students as experimental. In the control group students were given the same topics. They wrote about these topics at home and they got teacher written error correction for their writing tasks. The other processes in writing class were the same for both groups.

Results and Discussion

Group	N	mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig(2-tailed)	F	t	df
Pre control	20	10.55	0.0695	0.02338	0.86	1.283	-0.254	38
experimental	20	11.61	0.08774	0.03772	0.86		-0.254	37.267
Post control	20	13.84	0.37553	0.01413	0	25.86	-1.159	38
experimental	20	22.19	0.21556	0.02021	0		-1.159	36.689

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of comparing written performance between two groups in the pre-test and post-test

As Table 1 shows, scores in the pre-test for the control group are ($M = 10.55$, $SD = .069$) and experimental group ($M = 11.61$, $SD = .087$), $t(38) = -.254$, $P > .05$. The mean score shows that the quality of writing skill between two groups in the pre-test were the same. In the post-test, scores for the control group ($M = 13.84$, $SD = .37$) and experimental group ($M = 22.19$, $SD = .21$), $t(38) = -1.159$, $P = .000$. The results show that there is a significant difference between two groups in the post-test. In the post-test, the experimental group outperforms the control group in developing writing skill.

Diary writing is undoubtedly a very effective strategy for the whole learning process. However, it is not as easy as it seems since not all the students are willing to share it with their teacher and not all the students are ready to write the diary entries as the course has shown so far. Nevertheless, writing diaries is very useful both for the teacher in getting students' feedback about their learning constraints and difficulties and for students to learn how to learn.

Race (2002) believes that reflection deepens learning. The act of reflecting is one which causes us to make sense of what we've learned, why we learned it, and how that particular increment of learning took place. Reflection is equally useful when our learning has been unsuccessful – in such cases indeed reflection can often give us insights into what may have gone wrong with our learning, and how on a future occasion we might avoid now known pitfalls. Most of all, however, it is increasingly recognised that reflection is an important transferable skill, and is much valued by all around us, in employment, as well as in life in general.

Works Citation

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Appendix A lists some of the guiding questions for writing such a reflective essay.

Appendix A – Guidelines for writing a diary (Klimova, 2015)

Try to record your entries after class, at least once a week. Record in your diary any thoughts about the lesson on Academic Writing or any other lesson of English. Write date/day and a few sentences about your achievements or problems in learning English. In addition, the diary can include the following details:

1. What problems do/did you have in class or at home when learning English? How did you deal with these problems? How well did these solutions work for you?
2. As you approach a task, what do you do before, during, and after to complete the task? (Be sure to write about a specific task, do not state what you usually do. The closer your report is to an actual text or class, the more you will understand your patterns of problems and solutions). Do you feel that what you did was useful? If not, can you think of something else that might work for you?
3. Describe how you feel as you work on the assignment or in class? What did you do about those feelings? Did it help? If not, can you think of something else that might work for you?
4. If this is your second or third assignment, what did you do differently, based on comments on your prior assignment by the teacher or your peers? Was it helpful? If so, why? If not, why not?

Guiding questions for writing a reflective essay of a course (sample 2)

1. What did I actually achieve while attending this course? Which were the most difficult parts, and why were they difficult for me? Which were the most straightforward parts, and why did I find these easy?
2. How have I developed my knowledge and skills?
3. What were 3 greatest challenges in doing this course?
4. What was the most boring or tedious part of doing this course? What are your recommendations for a possible improvement?
5. In what way did this course help me in my future learning and career?
6. What advice would I give a friend about to enroll in this course?
7. What have I learned about myself while doing this course?