

EFL Journal Writing: An Exploratory Study in Self-expression as a Bridge for Creative Writing

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how reflective journal writing affected college students in a creative writing course and explores key factors to ensure a successful journal writing process. The qualitative data analysis based on students' journal entries and three surveys administered over the course of nine weeks indicate that the activity allowed students to deepen their self-awareness, served as a springboard for more elaborate creative pieces they later pursued, changed their attitude toward writing in English and enhanced their confidence, and increased their motivation for more challenging writing tasks. Trying to create an environment where students feel unthreatened by overly strict academic writing rules and having them keep a journal on a regular basis appear to play key roles in promoting a successful journal writing process.

INTRODUCTION

Educators of L1 learners and adult education as well as creative writing have long discussed the benefits of journal writing from various perspectives. The therapeutic effects of journal writing have also been noted in the field of psychotherapy since the 1960s when Ira Progoff popularized courses in journal writing.

As a former instructor for EFL writing courses, I empirically knew that L2 learners often experience and enjoy the cathartic effects that is said to often arise in the process of journal writing for L1 learners. Some might contend that L2 learners would not be capable of enjoying such cathartic effects due to the inherent problems of writing in a second language. In this paper I would like to posit that this is not the case. Although I always suspected that L2 learners could reap the benefits of journal writing, I never had an opportunity to formally evaluate the full extent of these benefits. Thus, one of the questions that I had in mind when I designed a college creative writing course for EFL students was whether or not L2 learners would experience the same psychological benefits as L1 learners and if so, to what extent?

Another question I had was whether or not journal writing would work as a springboard to more elaborate writing projects. I was also concerned with what conditions would be necessary to ensure a successful journal writing course.

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To measure the effects of journal writing itself and the effectiveness of class activities for the course, I conducted three questionnaires and read the students' journals. The results of the questionnaires and my reading led me to conclude that along with other benefits, my L2 students experienced the same cathartic effects that L1 learners commonly experience. Furthermore, the process of journal writing provided students with opportunities to engender ideas for more elaborate creative writing projects.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Definition of Journal Writing

A journal is often confused with a diary since the terms are often interchangeably used; however, a journal should be differentiated from a diary in that it synthesizes our thoughts and emotions with actions that we experience rather than just recording what has happened in our life (Snyder & Lindquist, 2010). It is precisely this reflective nature of journal writing, not the mere recording of daily events, which affects the students in their self-exploration as they launch into the task. Adams (2001) describes the process of journaling from the perspective of psychotherapy in the following:

Journal Therapy is the act of writing down thoughts and feelings to sort through problems and come to deeper understandings of oneself or the issues in one's life. Unlike traditional diary writing, where daily events and happenings are recorded from an exterior point of view, journal therapy focuses on the writer's internal experiences, reactions, and perceptions. (Introduction, para.1)

Effects of Journal Writing

One of the most prominent effects of journal writing is that it allows people to express their emotional turmoil or help them understand it and possibly relieve some tension. Adams (2001) claims that journal writers often identify and grasp problems in their life by describing some of the most pressing issues they are facing. In that process they often experience feeling of relief. In other words, the act of writing enables writers to analyze problems and come to terms with them. In that process, they experience catharsis.

Artof (1992, quoted in Tuan, 2010) adds to this testament when she says, through personal writing, we "uncover our family history, learn to see the world more clearly, heal unsolved issues, understand our fears, and explore our motivation"(p.82).

Another effect of journal writing that has been argued by many researchers is that it provides a brainstorming opportunity for more elaborate writing tasks. Fulwiler (1982) states that in the process of writing down ideas in journals, students can witness how their ideas are developed and gradually acquire the habit of thinking on paper.

Furthermore, the act of writing a journal on a regular basis often results in positive change in students' attitude toward writing. Students begin to get used to the act of writing, overcoming the initial sense of being burdened by it and find pleasure in

writing itself. One of Castellanos' students (2008) supports this when he says that the best thing about journal writing was to "get used to writing and improve writing skills by putting into practice vocabulary and grammar in context" (p. 118).

It should also be noted that although it may start out as a mere collection of fragments of ideas, journal writing often guides students to focus on certain issues and produce more formal and organized pieces of writing (Fulwiler, 1982).

Thus, journal writing has numerous benefits for EFL students and is recommended by many educators. However, to produce such effects requires certain conditions. Then, how can we assist the process to help produce the utmost results? What are some of the essential factors to facilitate successful journal writing?

Keys to Successful Journal Writing

One factor is that writers feel free from the conventions of academic writing that can freeze the free flow of their ideas. Writer and educator Natalie Goldberg (1986) stresses the importance of letting go of self-restrictions that writers often impose on themselves in her book, *Writing Down the Bones*. "Keep your hand moving. Don't cross out. Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Lose control. Don't think. Don't get logical." (p.8) are some of the phrases that characterize her belief.

It is crucial to create an environment where students feel safe and say anything they want in their journal without the pressure of their teachers and peers for the "correctness" of their writing. Students need to be engrossed in writing without being overly concerned about errors. Castellanos (2008) echoes this sentiment when she comments:

More importantly, journals are also places where students can try out their expressive voices freely without fear of evaluation...I encouraged students to write on a regular basis without being coerced by a grade that measured technical aspects of the language such as syntax, grammar, punctuation and the like. Instead, I evaluated the process as a whole and students received the highest grade for having completed the task. (p. 114)

As her students felt free of restrictions, she continued, "their writing flowed" (p.118).

Another decisive factor for making journal writing effective is that students make entries in their journal on a regular basis. Many advocates of free journaling suggest that students keep their journals daily or almost daily (Fulwiler, p. 27). Just as one tries to master any other skill, the more one does it, the better one gets. Goldberg (1986) also emphasizes the importance of making it a daily habit in order to allow oneself to penetrate into his or her mind.

METHODS

The following is the procedure with which the course was implemented.

Participants

Eighteen sophomore students at a selective private Japanese university participated in an elective course titled “Exploratory Writing: Discover Yourself Through Writing.” In this course, students were encouraged to keep journals on a regular basis and produce personal narratives, poems and short stories after receiving mini lectures on the general structure of each genre of writing. The average TOEFL score of the students was 523, which made them equivalent to upper-intermediate level students. Students’ average age was 19 and there were three male and 15 female students.

Procedure

The students were instructed to write journals on a regular basis mostly outside class hours and finish one B5 sized notebook (30 pages x2 =60 sheets) per month over a period of a term (9 weeks). After being shown examples of topics by the instructor and initially writing about them, students were recommended to generate their own list of topics and write about them in their journals. Students were also told not to be overly concerned about grammatical mistakes, spelling and punctuation rules and encouraged to follow the free flow of their ideas, and plumb the depths of their thoughts. They were also told that their journals would not be evaluated based on quality but rather on accomplishing the task itself.

Students were asked to bring their journals to class and share parts of their entries with their peers in groups of 3 and give feedback to each other for about 15 minutes in almost every class. Tips and prompts were given to help students generate new topics for their journal and to make it easier for them to launch into writing at the beginning. In addition, mini lessons were given to help them use their five senses to fully describe things around them in detail. Initially, students were taken for a walk outside to observe things they encountered, paying attention to details and upon returning to the classroom, were instructed to describe the things they had just observed in minute details, recalling what they saw, heard, smelled, tasted and touched.

After four lessons on journal writing in class where students experimented with various ways to write a journal, and when they appeared to understand the concept, students were left on their own for journal writing outside the class hours. Then, mini lectures showing basic patterns of personal narratives were given and students were encouraged to find ideas for the task from the entries in their journal as well as other sources. After students wrote their first drafts of personal narratives, they went through peer review as well as teacher review, revised their drafts and submitted them for evaluation based on quality. The same process was repeated for poetry writing and short story writing. Questionnaires with open-ended questions were administered three times to monitor the effects of journal writing and creative writing.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following findings and discussion are based on a qualitative review of response data from questionnaires conducted three times during the term (see the

appendix). The examination of responses revealed the following salient features regarding the effects of journal writing: enhances students' self awareness and allows him or her to cope with problems; functions as a bridge for producing creative writing pieces; develops their overall writing skills and habits; and fosters pleasure of writing in the end.

These features are isolated in five categories and discussed respectively: on self-awareness and therapeutic aspect, on creative writing, on changes in attitude and enhanced confidence in writing in English, on motivation and "others." Quotes from the respondents presented in these results are unaltered and pseudonyms are used for confidentiality.

On Self-awareness and Therapeutic Aspect

Students' responses to open-ended questions reveal that they learned a great deal about themselves through journal writing. The majority of the students reported that they have discovered a part of themselves that they had been unaware of before.

One student stated, "Journal writing gives me chances to re-think deeply about who I am (Kai)" as another claimed, "Writing knows more than I know. It expresses what I had been unconsciously thinking about and so on (Ami)." Other comments included, "Something unexpected happened during the activity and it eventually led me to re-find myself. I don't have many opportunities to wonder about a small things I dismiss in my daily life (Kai)" and "I fee that I am rediscovering the hidden feeling inside me by writing (Asami)." Another student described her writing experiences as "it made me explore my memories long ago and not so long ago. Through this process, I was able to see what kind of things happened to me affect the mind construction of myself (Yumiko)."

Students also seem to have come to terms with whatever inner conflicts they might have had in the process of free journal writing as one student stated, "keeping a journal makes you manage your emotions and complicated thoughts (Ami)." Journal writing also provides students opportunities to engage in dialogues with themselves as they wrestle with questions in their personal life and often allows them to come to resolutions of their problems. "Through writing, I can accept myself as who I am (Misa)." The same student continued, "I learned to be honest with myself through writing." To sum up, as another student stated, writing can work as therapy. "It can be a kind of therapy. When I have to write something, I can face to myself (Midori)."

On Creative Writing

In addition to increased self-awareness and the therapeutic effects it can engender, journal writing seems to enable students to discover ideas they do not usually pay attention to and allow them to describe and expand on these ideas freely. In other words, the process of writing a journal is comparable to brainstorming which is fundamental to most forms of writing, be it academic papers or creative stories.

One student claimed, "It made me realize that my life is filled with many things that I can write about (Karin)." Once students become able to tap into their thoughts and feelings and describe them in detail, I found that students are indeed able to produce

elaborate pieces of writing eventually. Through journal writing, many students found a trove of ideas for creative writing and got excited about writing. One student noted, “I found out how blessed I am with what I’ve experienced, saw, heard and there are many things which I want to try to express in letters (Karin).” Discovering writing materials in their own experiences inspire them for further writing. “Since I realized I could write anything I want on journal, it motivated me to create poetry and short stories (Kai).” Another student shared the enthusiasm as she said, “I didn’t know that writing stories is so much fun (Ami).”

On Changes in Attitude and Enhanced Confidence in Writing in English

By the end of the course, most students appeared to have become comfortable and confident, found it pleasurable and meaningful to write in English. The majority of the students reported they had gotten used to writing in English.

One student stated, “I have less stress of writing now. I wouldn’t think in English without writing a journal (Mizue).” Another student further said, “Writing became more natural to me. I feel comfortable writing things in English (Misa).” Yet another reported, “My hands start to move more naturally and continue to move for 30 minutes – 1 hour or more when I’m motivated to write when I have a strong feeling (Miku).”

It is interesting to note that several students confessed that they had longed for a writing opportunity, which would allow them to express their emotions, which they did not experience in academic writing. “Since I entered university, I got used to writing academic paper, but I was about to forget the pleasure of free writing at the same time. This course reminded me of expressing my feelings in writing. To be free from any rules that are required in academic writing was a meaningful experience to me (Ako).” Another student echoed this sentiment when he said, “I realized that I could write warmer words in English than in Japanese. I found myself able to express my feelings in English. It was very fresh experience to me because I didn’t like academic writing that pursue (pursue) objectively (Koji).”

Furthermore, their overall writing fluency appears to have been enhanced in the process. One student said, “Once I started to write, many things popped up and I thought I could work on this for hours. Also, I came not to hesitate writing reports in other course (Kai).” Another student claimed, “I think I became a faster writer because of the everyday journal writing. I had not liked to write before but I came to like it, which encourages me to write more smoothly and faster than before. I’m really happy about this (Yumiko).”

On Motivation

This renewed confidence in writing seems to have awakened new ambitions in some students. Some expressed their desire to keep on journaling long after the course was over. “After finishing this class, I wanted to keep writing not to forget the memory or what I thought (Ayu).”

Others expressed further aspirations as they reported, “I want to become more colorful with vocabulary (Ami)” or “I strongly felt the limitation of my vocabulary by writing journal. Therefore, I want to use various words and phrases in order to have a wide range of ways that describe a similar thing (Ako).” After writing a short story, one student said, “I want to describe things in detail so that readers can picture it or feel as if they were there (Misa)” and another concurred, saying, “I would like to write more interestingly so that the readers want to turn pages (Mizue).”

Yet other students showed interest in launching into other genres of writing. One student stated, “I would like to try other kind of short stories or long stories like a novel. I’d like to try someday (Misa).” Another said, “I’m curious about travel journal and food journal, so I’m going to read articles of these writers to learn what kind of journal they are (Ako).”

Other effects of journal writing

Other comments illustrate how the process of journal writing deepened their reflection or opened their eyes to things they had not paid attention to before. One student explained his experience as, “writing helps me see outer world widely and deeply and it makes my inner world ripe (Koji).” Another student said, “I became to pay attention to the details of what happens to me or what I do, see, hear or taste in everyday life so that I can write smoothly and lively (Yumiko).” Yet another student observed, “I gradually come to pay attention to environment surrounding me in a process of looking for topic for journal. My world of view has changed little by little and a very small event inspires me to write a story (Ako).”

Negative Responses

However, it must also be noted that there were some students who showed some reservations for the amount and the regularity of the writing that was expected of them. As one student stated, “It’s difficult to write every day. It’s still challenging to make it my custom (Makoto),” keeping journal entries on a regular basis still remained a daunting task to some students even to the end. One possible reason for this is that they could not find topics they can be passionate about or they felt somewhat inhibited by the thought of exposing his emotions through writing.

Moreover, students sometimes unnecessarily inhibited themselves by interpreting tips that were meant to improve formal writing pieces to be the golden rules that have to be applied to their journal writing. “The techniques to make my writing alive (eg. using dialogues) made it difficult for me to write because I really think (Yumiko).”

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATION

Based on these responses to questionnaires and observations, I believe that journal writing on a regular basis can bring about numerous benefits to EFL students. First, it facilitates exploration of their inner thoughts and feelings, expands their understanding of themselves and helps them come to terms with some of their problems. In addition, it

furnishes students with opportunities to brainstorm ideas for future creative writing pieces. Furthermore, writing in English as part of their daily habit helps students overcome the sense of difficulty with writing in English, enhances their confidence and fosters the joy of writing. In short, it empowers them not only in terms of language skills but also in the personal realm of their inner thoughts.

To maximize the efficacy of journal writing, however, requires some conditions. Some of the key factors in facilitating a successful journal writing process include 1) to create an environment where students feel safe from evaluation based on rigid rules of writing conventions and 2) to have students make entries in their journals on a regular basis.

A closer examination of students' responses also reveals that there is some room for improvement in facilitating a better journal writing process. Although the majority of the students in the course clearly indicated that their attitude toward writing improved significantly, there were some students who expressed difficulty exploring their inner feelings and expressing them directly through writing since not everyone wishes to elaborate on their emotions. Emphasizing that it is quite acceptable to write about the outer world, for example, about global issues and the business world, which appears seemingly unrelated to exploring their inner world, is one possible approach and might help them get into the habit of writing without hesitation.

More frequent monitoring of students' journal entries is another way to identify difficulties some students might be experiencing in early stages and allow the instructor to intervene and direct them in a positive direction. Furthermore, students should be reminded from time to time that they should not feel bound by any rules and they are allowed to write about anything in any form in their journals so as not to inhibit the free expression of their thoughts.

As regards to measuring the effect of writing fluency, it is desirable to collect quantitative data in addition to qualitative data to gain more precise understanding of the journal writing process.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire 1

1. What are your strengths and weaknesses as a writer?
2. What motivated you to take this course?
3. What are you hoping to achieve through this course?
4. What are your favorite genres of writing?
5. Who are some of your favorite writers? What aspects of their writing do you like?
6. What do you want to gain through this course that is different from the ARW or RCA courses you took as freshmen?
7. Please introduce yourself. You can write anything you would like to share with me.

Questionnaire 2

1. How is your journal writing going? How many pages have you written so far? Has it become easier to write in English or is it still a challenge?
2. Have you changed as a writer compared with the beginning of the term? How has the writing so far affected you and your writing?
3. How did you use the list of topics you generated yourself?
4. What have you learned about writing so far?
5. What new things would you like to try/learn the rest of the term?
6. What are your goals regarding writing for the rest of the term?

Questionnaire 3

1. How many pieces of writing did you finish this term (except for journal)?

Personal narratives—

Poems/haiku--

Short stories--

2. What are your favorite genres to write? Why?
3. At which pieces of writing are you most effective? Why? (What did you do as the writer?)
4. What are your major accomplishments this term as a writer?

5. What are your strengths as a writer?
6. What are the areas in which you can improve?
7. How differently would you approach this course if you could do it all over again?
8. How has this course affected you and your writing? Do you feel any changes?
9. Which activities did you enjoy most?
10. Which activities did you find most useful to you? Why?
11. Which activities did you find least useful to you? Why?
12. What other genres of writing would you like to try in the future?