

An Analysis of Student Journals in a Sri Lankan English for Academic Purposes Course¹

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Abstract

This paper examines journal writing, which was part of the third year English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme's ongoing assessment from 2014 to 2019, evaluating the practice as an activity which promoted English writing fluency in University students of low proficiency. Thus, the development of research connected to Diary Studies will be traced and the current study will be evaluated according to the methods promoted in these early studies. The findings will be evaluated against results of more recent diary studies conducted by researchers such as Matsumoto. This study examines journal writing as a practice which promotes language learning and improves writing fluency and also evaluates it as a tool which provides two-way feedback which on the one hand motivates students and on the other provides insights on the learning process to the language teacher. It concludes that the language teacher is able to gain a comprehensive insight to the nature of the errors students make and thus becomes better equipped to help them along in the learning process through this exercise of sustained writing.

Keywords: *Student Journals, English for Academic Purposes, Diary Studies, EAP Instruction*

¹ I am grateful to all the instructors of the ELTU of the Arts Faculty who were part of this exercise between the years 2014 and 2020, and supported this venture by encouraging students to maintain the journal. If they had not untiringly marked these journals, which came to around twenty-five per instructor, and expressed an interest in what the students had to say and collaborated with the author, this research would not have been possible.

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Introduction

The third-year Sinhala medium students of the Arts Faculty of the University of Peradeniya following the English for Academic Purposes courses (EAP 301/302) were required to maintain a student journal as part of their on-going assessment from the year 2014 onwards. This study evaluates the merits of this exercise by analyzing journal entries made by students between the years 2014 and 2019. Journal writing is a useful data collection method and it gave instructors insights to the improvement or lack thereof, in student writing by revealing the types of errors students frequently made. The exercise itself is here evaluated as a student-centered learning strategy accepted by students, as an exercise which promoted learning by allowing them to engage in a sustained writing activity, which in addition gave important insights to the instructors. Thus, the success of the journal writing activity is evaluated in terms of writing fluency, motivation and as a practice which provided feedback on the language learning process. The English language proficiency of the average Arts Faculty first year (students) at entrance level is rather poor with almost 85% needing remedial instruction as indicated by the results of the placement tests of the past years. These students signed up for the EAP 300 level course at the end of two years of ESL instruction. Since the EAP 300 level program was a course in which they were trained to read and write to address the requirements of their academic course they needed practice in writing so that they were at ease and not intimidated by the prospect of writing academic essays in English. According to the earlier ESL/EAP curriculum students who studied in the Sinhala medium were not writing at length in English in these courses. Thus, their writing was poor in terms of language use, basic mechanics, vocabulary, content, and organization. The journal, vocabulary book and the reading and writing portfolios were introduced to remedy this situation. The journal writing exercise was initiated specifically to help them practice expressing themselves in a language they admitted were intimidated by. Thus, in the very first year the students were given excerpts from well-known diaries such as Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, Adrian Mole's *Dairies* and Leonard Wolfe's *Diaries* and even excerpts from Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* to make journal writing seem like a non-threatening even enjoyable exercise. It must be noted that the actual format of the student journal went through many changes during this period of six years. It was

initially in the years 2014 and 2015 a daily diary of what the students did and thought every day. However, in 2016 the students, who had by then accepted journal writing as an activity they could benefit by, since two batches before them had engaged in the activity, were introduced to the practice of reflective writing in 2016 and 2017 and they were encouraged to explore what they could produce in their journals writing introspectively. However, those who felt they wanted to explore other writing styles were encouraged to do so. In 2018 and 2019 students were encouraged to use the journals as a metacognitive activity where they examined their own language learning process. Thus, as six batches of students engaged in the activity the instructions, the format of journal entries, the writing requirements and evaluation criteria underwent many changes as the researcher kept studying the journals produced every year and attempted to make the exercise a meaningful one students would benefit by. It was a journey which gave the author many insights as to how learners and teachers engaged in the teaching and learning processes connected to the skill of writing in the second language.

Journal Writing – A Tool of Language Learning

Diary studies have become an important part of the study of language acquisition and learning. Bailey (1990) says “a diary study is a first-person account of a language learning or teaching experience”. Bailey and Schumann and Schumann (1977) are the earliest examples of first-person case studies in this area. Nunan (1992) states that diaries are important not only as a data collection method but also in the language learning process.

Curtis and Bailey (2009) point out that language learner diaries offer “insights to processes which are not easily accessible or open to investigation” and thus can “provide useful information to language teacher, learners and researchers”. These detailed notes on events, actions, emotions and thoughts contained in diaries or journals help teachers gain insights to the learning experience of the student.

Casanave (1995) has analyzed some journal entries made by students in order to evaluate the success of the tool in one of her studies. Discussing the

merits of journal writing Casanave (1995) says that it is an exercise which will promote learning:

“With ungraded journals as a tool and vehicle, students in English Classes can explore their own thinking in ways they may have never done before. The fact that second or foreign language learners are doing this exploration in English demonstrates that language instruction can be contextualized within larger educational goals. The language teacher who uses a tool such as journals does not neglect the development of language proficiency, because language is the medium by which students develop and express thoughts and explore the world around them”. (97)

Casanave (1995) goes on to say that for journal writing to be a successful endeavor which contributes to educational goals four conditions must be met “students need to have something to say, a reason for saying it and they need to be able to write in a risk-free environment without restrictions to format or grammatical accuracy and they need to receive substantive feedback from interested teachers”. Thus, it appears that feedback forms one dimension of diary studies.

Kazuko Matsumoto’s (1989) analysis of a Japanese ESL learner’s diary also provides interesting insights to how a Journal maintained by a language learner becomes important in analyzing elements such as the effect of positive feedback on learner motivation. Matsumoto examines the effect of positive feedback on learner motivation and the role of self-awareness and self- analysis in the L2 learning process.

Many researchers have identified writing apprehension as one of the key elements which affect ESL and EFL learners. Minjong Song’s study of 1997 indicates that Journal writing is an exercise which can reduce learners’ writing apprehension and that journal writing develops their writing proficiency by making them use their oral communicative competence in performing written communication as well as helping them in the language acquisition process by helping students put language into context in keeping with their own experiences (Steffensen, 1988 as Cited by Song). The

teacher's input would increase their competence. Song's study of EFL learner proves that the instructor's comments encourage students and improves their writing skills (Shuy 1988, Staton 1984 and Peyton 1988 as cited by Song 1997). Thus, it appears that written feedback from the instructor or teacher is also important in an exercise of this nature. When students write they need to be kept motivated by the feedback instructors give.

Srichanyachon (2012) says that although there is debate about giving feedback to students, comments of praise and encouragement as well as clear explanations for error correction are seen as a must. Srichanyachon (2012) is also emphatic on the point that the writing instructor's response should not merely address grammar and content but should include elements of praise and encouragement in their feedback. The present research also proves that while teacher feedback motivates students the actual writing done by the students give important feedback to the instructor about their level of skill which is a cognitive factor. When students understand where they are going wrong and the reasons for the mistakes they make, they are in control of their own learning and halfway to becoming autonomous learners.

A Brief Review of Diary Studies

According to Baily (1990), a diary study is a first-person account of a language learning or teaching experience, documented through regular, candid entries in a personal journal and then analyzed for recurring patterns or salient events. The earliest studies conducted by Schumann and Schumann and Baily in 1977 and 1980 respectively were used by linguists researching the cognitive and affective factors which are considered in language learning. Schumann's study examined factors such as competition and cooperation among second language learners, learning strategies such as eaves dropping and speaking and learners' reaction to pedagogical techniques.

Spack and Sadow (1983) say that although journals are an excellent strategy for promoting writing there are certain difficulties when students write on personal issues because it encourages unskilled writers to write

egocentrically without anticipating the needs of the reader who is in this case the instructor (1983).

Matsumoto's (1988) research was limited to one learner and was based on an analysis of the entries made during an eight weeks period. One of the key issues discussed in this research is anxiety on the part of the learner and how it is expressed. Some of the other factors which were identified in her research subject's diary were teacher praise, teaching methods, classmates, success vs. failure, progress and improvement.

“A diary study in second language learning, acquisition, or teaching is an account of a second language experience as recorded in a first-person journal. The diarist may be a language teacher or a language learner-but the central characteristic of the diary studies is that it they are introspective: the diarist investigates his own teaching or learning. Thus he can report on affective factors, language learning strategies, and his own perceptions-facets of the language learning experience which are normally hidden or largely inaccessible to an external observer”. (189)

In the field of diary studies a journal is a confidential written communication which takes place between a student and a teacher which goes on for a semester of a school year (Peyton & Reed 1990 as quoted by Liao and Wong 2007).

The terms journal or diary are used interchangeably in this research area. Curtis and Baily (2009: 68) say that the keeping of journals and the resulting analyses and interpretation of such data have been called diary studies. They point out that a diary study consists of maintaining an introspective journal, which is the data collection tool, and analyzing the patterns and anomalies that occur in these diary entries. Language learner journals too have been examined and analyzed in the interest of research and this process is considered as secondary, indirect and non-introspective as explained by Curtis and Baily (2009). They also point out that journals and diaries do not have to be written they can be spoken records.

Curtis and Baily (2009) say that the diarist might not always write articulately and may sometimes produce a flat account which is simply a compilation of facts without introspection. If limited proficiency does not allow them to express their thoughts confidently and fluently the journal will become a burden for some writers according to Curtis and Bailey (2009:). They point out that in this case students can be encouraged to keep their journal in their first language or a mix of first and second languages. Although the purpose of the journal is to record thoughts, feelings and actions about encounters in the target language, writing a diary in the target language can provide excellent language practice and will help learners discover what they can and cannot confidently write (Curtis and Bailey, 2009).

Thus, in ESL and EFL studies a diary can simply be an account of a language learning experience maintained by a learner or a language teacher, which would make it a reflective journal or diary. However, a diary kept by a learner with the instructor responding at length to the entries made by the learner is considered a dialogue journal. However, Language Learning Diaries and Journals are not restricted to these two categories. Language teachers and researchers have been extremely inventive in the use of diaries as a method for generating data for ethnographic and qualitative research. Spack and Sadow (1983) called the journals used in their research of 1983 student-teacher working Journals and the writers of these journals were students whose first-language was English. The teachers involved as well as students were writing journals and sharing them. They also point out the fact that as well as students receiving feedback on what they wrote, teachers too received feedback on their teaching which would help them in honing their strategies.

Liao and Wong's study of 2007, which examines the Effect of Dialogue Journals on L2 Students' writing fluency, reflections anxiety and motivation points out that apprehensive writers tend to avoid writing and consider the activity to be a unrewarding and even punishing (Liao and Wong citing Faigley, Daly &Witte 1981). The authors go on to highlight the fact that ESL learners might find writing in English even more challenging (2007). They

point out that the journal is a non-threatening activity which provides such learners with an opportunity to practice using a target language (2007).

Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to evaluate students' response to the journal writing activity and its success as an exercise which encouraged students to write, explore their feelings towards learning and engaging in English and also to evaluate if feedback from instructors encouraged them to continue writing and to identify the basic errors commonly made by students.

Thus, the numbers of journals written each year will be examined and some of the entries made by students will be analyzed in order to gain insights to students' writing anxiety, their attitudes towards the exercise and learning of English and their receptiveness towards teacher feedback as a form of motivation. Therefore, answers will be sought for the following questions:

1. How was the exercise received by students?
2. What was the student response in terms of numbers of journals written?
3. What were the sentiments expressed about learning anxiety and motivation?

Material and Methods

From the first semester of the academic year 2013/2014 students following the EAP 301 courses were asked to maintain a daily journal about their routine or their studies during the third-year course. They were informed that they could write freely with no restriction about the topics on which they were to write. They were also told that this would be a risk-free activity and that marks would not be deducted for the mistakes they made or the errors committed. They were given guidelines about the number of journal entries and the length of the entries. In the first year (2014) the instructors did not comment on the entries but corrected the spelling and the grammar. However, since the students appeared de-motivated the instructors were told to respond to the student writing in a form they were comfortable with, i.e. written or oral comments. Thus in 2015 these "diaries" took the form of dialogue journals of sorts. This practice continued till the year 2016 when the

students were given a choice about the type of journal they would maintain. They were informed that they could maintain a daily diary or they could write in response to the EAP classes they had and what they learned during those hours. These choices were given to the students to motivate them to write. Thus, for this research Data was gathered from Journals written in the academic years 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019. Post study questionnaires were also administered to evaluate the students' attitude about writing the Journal to a control group of 20 students every year except in 2019. It is widely accepted that diary studies lack reliability and credibility if solely based on diary entries thus triangulation is encouraged. Thus, every year between 38 and 20 students were studied as a control group. The researcher has also continued to informally interview the control group students on the exercise. An analysis of the number of students undertaking the assignment, the results from the questionnaires and analysis of the student entries have been used in concluding about the relative merits of the personal journal as a tool in the language learning process. However, the present study only considers the number of students who undertook the assignment and analyzes some entries they made. In 2018 and 2019 the students were requested to engage in writing about what they learn as a metacognitive practice. However, consent to use the control group's journals in this research could not be obtained therefore some of the results will be limited to the years between 2013 and 2018. Follow up interviews are also yet to be conducted for the last batch of students who engaged in this exercise. The teachers' feedback on journal writing was obtained through one to one discussions and weekly, monthly and yearly briefing sessions where they received instructions and the exercise was discussed.

Results and Discussion

The Table 1 shows that the activity was accepted by a high percentage of the students. Those who chose not to write were students who had low attendance or never attended EAP lectures. Student had a choice to write or not to write the journal. If they didn't agree with journal writing as a reasonable ongoing assessment activity they could consult with the instructor and the coordinator of the course and choose an activity more suited to them.

Table 1: Student Acceptance of the Activity

Academic year	Batch	Total Journals	Number of Students who chose not to write the student journal	As a Percentage
2013/2014	2010	473	33	6.9 %
2014/2015	2011	636	27	4.2%
2015/2016	2012	517	34	6.5%
2016/2017	2013	567	15	2.6%
2017/2018	2014	644	30	4.6%
2018/2019	2015	564	25	4.4%

Source: Author's Records

Although the marks obtained for journal writing as part of ongoing assessment related to the course are available they will not be presented in the current study due to questions of reliability of data, because instructors may have been subjective in their response to the journals and thus the marks may not be uniformly allocated by all 22 instructors involved in the program in a given year. Therefore, due to rater bias this data will not be considered in this paper.

Analysis of Some Entries

Although journal writing was seen as an exercise which would encourage students to express frustration and anxiety a language learning situation can produce, the very problem of lack of proficiency seems to have inhibited such writing. In the following section some journal entries will be presented. The journal entries were randomly chosen and the anonymity of the students and instructors has been maintained. The first number indicates the student and the second the batch the student belonged to. Thus 001 is the particular student's number and the next number 14/15/16/17 are a reference to the batch. Some feedback comments from teachers have also been included.

Student Entry 1 - (0 01/16) (unedited)

I like to learn English. At the same time I like to speak in English. But now I don't like English because I couldn't pass the ESL exam. I have a great disgusted. (05.04.2016)

This entry is clearly an expression of frustration and bitterness on the part of the student. However, since the learner is writing her feelings down and expressing herself and receiving feedback there is some hope. Unfortunately, this was the period during which instructors were not responding with written feedback therefore the author is only aware that the instructor spoke to the student and arranged for remedial sessions. The following entries express some enthusiasm for the newly introduced journal writing activity which was very heartening. The student appears confident that he/she will benefit by it.

Student Entry 2 - (001/14)

In our third year the English course is very organized programme. We have four classes per week for writing and reading. Firstly, I must thank the ELTU. Now I attend my English lectures very eagerly. I think journal is a very Important activity for us. As well as the instructors are very good. They have very good teaching skills we will improve our English knowledge very much. (17 June 2014)

Student Entry 3 - (002/14)

I have a wish. Still it is difficult to me to make that wish come true when I enter into university and started to go to lectures, I scared a lot because of the English language. Therefore I started to sit on the corner. Still I am sit on corner. Still I am sit on corner as before. Now I know English little bit and I liked to answer the questions which are raised by lecturers. But I don't. I always think why I don't speak at the classroom. Is it everyone laughing at me or will it be wrong answer. Before finishing 4th year I want to sit in front at Dr. ___'s lecture and answer at least on question. (14.08.2014)

Student Entry 4 - (003/14)

Throughout most of my teen years I tried to keep a diary but I failed miserably. On the rare days I did remember to write the entries were short and uninteresting. But when I got to know that we have to maintain a personal journal as a requirement for EAP 301 course I was happy ...I hope it would help me improve my English language and the writing skills. Moreover, it will help me to release my stress. (17.03.2014)

Student Entry 5 - (001/15)

It was our first EAP class. The lecture was really Interesting even though it was just an Introduction to the course. ... Now I am writing this journal as a result of that new start. I think That will be really interesting and effective for all of us during the whole semester as well as the whole year to gain fruitful outcomes. (24.02.2015)

These entries contain errors in language use, mechanics etc. However, the students were told to write freely so the errors would be dealt with in the writing lessons which would come later in the semester.

Student Entry 6 - (001/16)

If I can English Fluently If I have could speak in English, writeng in English, understanding in English I study my (main) subject than this situation. We started to studying (main) subject in in Sinhala but now our lectures conducted their lectures only in English... I like to speak with others in English..... (07/06/2016)

Student entry 6 contains some errors such as a missing verb and a misspelt verb and the misuse of a comparative form. The student expresses a challenge she/he is currently facing in terms of language learning and the medium of instruction. Student entry seven is one in which the student examines introspectively the skill of writing.

Student Entry 7 - (002/15)

Writing is no easy task, specially when the mind is distracted. For me, I need the fullest corporation of and coordination between brain, mind and body to write something up to my standards. This may not apply to everybody, but I think the case in most instances is similar. So I call this 'writing soul'. There are Persons who can just write things when they get hold of paper and ink. May be it is their special talent, but I have experienced that such writings are not what we thought we wrote when reading sometime later. But if something is wrote with actual concentration and continuous functioning of one's brain, you might even not be able to believe that you wrote it. Thus, there is a writer within every literate person of sound mind. So what differentiate others from a writer is the degree of concentration. (14.03.2015)

Student entry eight is one a student wrote after they were introduced to writing reflectively. The entry shows that the student is enthusiastic and hopeful confident that they will benefit by writing in this manner.

Student Entry 8 - (001/16)

Madam has explained us about how to write journals. She mainly taught us to write the Journal in reflective forms. It means we have to think in depth instead of writing about what we usually do in our day to day activity. While she was explaining I really felt interesting ...As far as I am concerned journal will be a way of stress Release. (23.02.2016)

Student entry nine was chosen because it was from the earliest sessions when journal writing had been initiated and it contains many of the types of errors students frequently made. There are spelling errors, errors in word order and expression and the entry also shows that the student has some vocabulary limitations. The instructor corrected the expression "power had gone " with the sophisticated expression "power-outage". The author contested this

correction because essentially the error and the correction should be easily understood by the student. In Sri Lanka the accepted expression is “power cut”. Therefore, the author is of the opinion that students should be given options which are in use and they might be familiar with and not ones which are completely alien to them.

Student Entry 9 - (004/14)

The day was a rainy day. It was cat and dog rain. I heard my father said thies these days rained. because wather is changed. My father didn't go to work. I woke up at 8.00 a.m. I felt that was a lazy day. Whole day I watched T.V. Some ereas had flood. At that time it was rainy. So Suddenly electricity power had gone. So we go to bed. (02.06.2014)

Student entry ten is one in which a student admits lack of vocabulary as one of the key issues they have when writing in English. The student says that if one encounters a new word it should be looked up and learnt before the end of the day. Since limited vocabulary was a key issue identified in planning the EAP 301 and 302 courses student were encouraged to maintain a vocabulary book in tandem with the journal and writing and reading portfolios. Student entry eleven is an instance where a student has used the journal in an exercise where he/she attempts to find the true meaning of a word.

Student Entry 10 - (003/15)

I feel lazy to maintain the journal but it is good for us to improve English. I have limited vocabulary. So if I have something to write I find out the more words from dictionary and it will never forget. I think this should be done before another day has come to an end. (14.03.2015)

Student Entry 11 - (002/15)

The Oxford English Mini Dictionary says 'humble' means 'having low opinion of your importance' and I do not agree with it upto my knowledge and experience of human behaviour rather than of English. My definition of being

humble is quite different. I think to be humble is to have an actual realization of one's rank and importance, but not to have the desire to show it off to others. If I meet a person who has more than enough reasons to believe that he is somebody higher than others, but yet interacts with everybody as if he is nothing but equal, I call that person "humble". This is quite different from not having the confidence and Personality to stick to and maintain one's status. Therefore, I want to be a "humble" person according to my definition whatever the Oxford says. (14.03.2015)

Student entries 12 and 13 are ones in which students discuss writing activities and is an instance of the strategies they adopt to generate ideas.

Student Entry 12 - (003/15)

Even if we had no idea about our topic we collected points of our opinion about meaningful statements We used logic to prove that. However the others spoke about paraphysical ontological matters. I have read so many books about ontological matters. (14.03.2015)

Student Entry 13 - (002/15)

I have often wondered what the suitable punishment for the offence of murder is.....But I wonder whether killing the killer, keeping him locked in a cell forever would suffice in redressing the harm done to human life. ...How much does a human life cost and who and how can decide the value of life of another.... (29.04.15)

The following are some comments instructors made about student journal entries. In the first one the instructor is responding to a new writing strategy the student has adopted. The student has received a comment about how good her knowledge of vocabulary is. The second teacher comment is also one that would encourage the student to keep writing. Teacher feedback motivates students and gives them insights to how they can improve.

Teacher Comment 1

Dear -----, I loved the story. If this is what you want to do in your journal please go ahead and continue to explore your language. Try to work on words. You have a good vocabulary. Draw on it when you write.

Good!!!

Teacher Comment 2

- *Your journal entries are very good and interesting*
- *Also, you have made regular entries.*
- *You have written about your personal feelings.*
- *It is a good journal, continue your good work.*

(22.04 .2016)

Student entries 14, 15 and 16 are responses to feedback from instructors. They express satisfaction and motivation. Teacher praise is a key factor in student motivation as highlighted in Matsumoto's 1989 study

Student Entry 14 - (004/14)

First, I like to tell about madam's comments. I am very happy. I also think I can write as interesting. I can't write an exam peper. I think, it is a my weakness. (02.06.2014)

Student Entry 15

(001/17)

Last semester I missed writing journal. I feel fear to do it because I think, I can't study English and I am unclever girl. But this semester I got my essay from my class teacher_____. She encouraged me at that time. She tell me "your essay is very interesting and very good," I feel very happy. So I think to write my journal. (16.02.2017)

Student Entry 16

(001/16)

Today has.....Madam's lecture. She described analyzed and asked questions from us. But all are never gave answer without Sagara. As I think students like to madam. But they don't like English.

I got my journal. Madam had wrote various comment, I like it and motivated by it.
(23.02.2016)

Student Entry 17 is one in which a student speaks of an introduction they received about reflective writing and the student says that the class discussion helped him/her understand the concept under discussion.

Student Entry 17

(002/16)

Today is very important day that I understand the real meaning of "Reflective writing". It created a path to make my journal new way with my thoughts and feelings. In my English class I exchanged ideas about reflective writing with my friends and teacher. It caused to create a sense in our mind about regarding "how we think on paper...Actually, today's discussion about Reflective writing was very effective and helped me to think

(23.02.2016)

Student entries 18, 19 and 20 are entries which claim satisfaction with the experience of journal writing.

Student Entry 18

(002/17)

These are my last journal entries. It was a good Activity. I feel happy when I write my journal...I Feel free when I write my journal. I like to think and write. My mind is full of ideas. These ideas and thoughts build my mind. I didn't steal any ideas. Journal is my own writing work. (14.05.2017)

Student Entry 19

(001/16)

Today is the last day that I am going to write my Journal for the second semester. I felt so boring when our madam told us to write a journal every day. But my feeling towards it is totally different today. Now I feel it is the way to improve our language skills. I found out so many new words with their meanings. Actually, this was a great experience for me. Thank you for helping me to improve my language. (23.02.2016)

Student Entry 20

(002/17)

Thank you ELTU. Thanks all of my English Teachers.
One day my writing madam order to write to a journal. I do not Like it. I was feel anger, but now I thanked my teacher. This journal not only my daily routine but also changed my whole life.
I could improve my English knowledge and also now I am a good

writer . My ELTU program is end. But I want to keep this habit continue. I like to write I learnt English whole my life but this is the correct way to learn English. Please continue this for next Batch. (14.05.2017)

Thus the student entries discussed thus far gave insights to language learning anxiety, enthusiasm generated by journal writing and the effect of positive feedback on students. Student entry 21 was one which flabbergasted the author and the instructor involved. The student has copied out a joke she found on the internet because the title read “English is not that Easy”. The joke is offensive and even racist. Thus it caused much consternation among the instructors at the monthly briefing where the week’s work was discussed. An activity like journal writing might blur the lines and a student might take liberties such as this one. However students have to be instructed on professionalism and the boundaries which exist in encounters such as the one between teacher and students.

Student entry 21

(005/14)

English is not that easy
A: Do you speak English?
B: Yes
A: Name
B: Abdul al-Rhasib
A: Sex
B: three or four times a week
A: No no I mean male or female
B: Yes, male, female, camel
A: Holy cow
Etc.,

13.06.2014 (corrected on 17 November 2014)

Thus, one of the main intentions of this study was to identify the errors students made. Thus it was found that the misuse of prepositions and articles and direct translation absent verbs were the main errors committed. Limited vocabulary accounted for some errors which resulted due to lexical choices. There were also clear indications of fossilization, overgeneralization, simplification and false concept hypothesis. In terms of mechanics many students ignored basic conventions regarding use of capitals and punctuation marks. This was an area in which the instructors could keep alerting them to the mistakes they made in the journal entries and help them correct the errors they made. In the case of learner errors, the instructors and the researcher herself gained insights to the reason behind many errors because the journal activity put the errors into context. The main aim was to provide a context for them to write within so that instead of learning grammar in a disjointed way they were able to practice the rules taught in a controlled safe place. If they made a mistake the instructor had a context within which the grammar rule or convention could be explained. The student had greater autonomy in this sense. Since it was English for Academic Purposes course the instructors also used the feedback as an opportunity to inform students of style and register appropriate to the writing they were doing.

Thus, it appears that the practice of recounting their daily experiences and reflecting on them helped the students become more comfortable with the language learning process. Instead of learning grammar they experienced practicing the language “in context”. In addition, they were given an opportunity to write with no emphasis on grammar, which inhibits their writing. In addition to giving the instructor insights into the errors (grammar, mechanics and vocabulary) they frequently made these entries also revealed the emotional and psychological factors which influenced the students’ language learning process. The main findings are that there is improvement in the students writing and vocabulary expansion because the instructors were constantly correcting and providing feedback. However, it has also been revealed that writing every day is stressful and that when the journal takes the form of a personal diary, students feel jaded. Thus, writing day to day activities becomes a boring endeavor. The instructors too found it difficult to respond to extremely personal experiences which the students wrote about. Informal interviews confirmed that the students became bored

with writing the same things and that teacher feedback motivated them, and helped them to experiment with writing styles. Statistics about the number of students who took up the journal writing activity in the relevant years point to the fact that they understood the benefits of this activity and accepted it as such. The sheer volume of writing this generated on the part of the students increased the workload of instructors. Collecting, marking and providing feedback became a burden. Thus, it can be said that the journal writing activity though successful needs modifications in the way it is administered. In comparing with the land mark diary studies, it should be noted that though the diary was seen as a tool which promoted self-awareness and self-analysis or self-reflection for the language learner in the case of the study under discussion the journal entries rarely reached the level of sophistication desired in terms of self-analysis because of limited language proficiency. If results are to be compared with previous studies the evidence for anxiety, which was a key focus in Matsumoto's study of 1989, is quite notable in the present study. Diary studies are also case studies there is a problem in generalizability however the element discussed here were the most common ones.

Limitations

The diary is an exchange based on trust thus sometimes learners may have been reluctant to share certain factors which influenced their learning. Since diary studies are also case studies there is a problem in generalizability. Almost all diary studies point to the fact that language learning is idiosyncratic and students have different cognitive styles but the errors made were quite uniform. Diary studies such as this one based on entries made by students have the basic limitation of honesty, which involves the question of plagiarism. The current research simply examines the content of student journals with regards to whether the exercise had the desired effect of encouraging the students to write in a risk-free environment. Thus, it lacks the sophistication of a more scientific research.

Conclusion

The diary or journal is a useful tool for gaining insights to the language learning and teaching process when weighed against simple external

observation however some limitations do remain, because the validity of data might be questioned and there is the problem of generalizability.

Usually a journal is used in EAP courses by students to reflect on the writing process involved in writing a research paper. It then becomes a meta-cognitive activity. In second language learning too, ideally the journal should be maintained about the language learning activity and process. However, the journal writing activity which was part of this study demonstrates that both the student and the teacher benefit from the dialogue form although many students maintained it in the daily diary form. The student is able to practice the language and the instructor gains an insight to the difficulties the student has. It is a student-centered activity because when the instructor explains the errors in the true context it occurred in, it becomes clearer for the student. However, students should be encouraged to maintain the conventional language learners' journal if they are to benefit through this endeavor.

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