



TEACHING WRITING IN ESL/EFL CLASSES THROUGH JOURNALS

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ABSTRACT

Writing is the process of producing and recording words in a readable and understandable form. In ESL/EFL classes, teaching writing is a frightening task for many teachers as students present problems that are different from those found in the writing of native English speaking students. Journal writing, a new trend in English language teaching, can be used to improve students' ability to write in English because it provides students with sources for language and writing improvement.

The current research paper aims at identifying the methods through which writing skill in ESL/EFL classes can be taught and enhanced through journal writing. It provides various practical activities for journal writing teachers can use to enhance English writing skills of their learners.

KEY WORDS : Teaching Writing, ESL/EFL Classes, Journals

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1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is a method of representing language visually or tactilely. It is the process of producing and recording words in a readable and understandable form. Teaching writing in ESL/EFL classes is a frightening task for many teachers. Traditionally, the majority of ESL/EFL teacher education programs emphasized on developing students' oral and reading skills than on their writing skills; writing has often been the last skill to be taught after listening, speaking and reading. Since it was not until relatively recently that entire courses in teaching ESL/EFL writing have been designed and taught in ESL/EFL teacher education programs, few students preparing to become ESL/EFL teachers have had the opportunity to develop an adequate understanding of what makes a successful writer (Reid, 1993).

learners of ESL/EFL classes often present problems that are different from the writings of native English speaking students. These include culturally conditioned rhetorical patterns that sound 'strange' to the native speakers' ears as well as unfamiliar grammatical errors that are simply not found in the writings of native speakers.

2. Journal Writing in Writing Classes

Journal writing is a technique that has been encouraged by educators in many fields, including nursing, and management, as a means of facilitating reflective practice and stimulating critical thinking (Bain et al., 1999). In Spaventa (2000), Journals are described as notebooks in which writers keep a record of ideas, opinions, and description of daily life. Journals help writers develop their creativity.

In the field of teacher education, reflection is widely acknowledged and promoted as a critical

element in the professional development of teachers (Zeichner, 1992; Calderhead & Gates, 1993). Using teaching and learning journals as a tool for self-reflection by teachers has been well documented in many studies (Zeichner, 1987; Rosenthal, 1991). Providing contexts constructs an understanding of teachers' philosophy of teaching, as well as their strengths and weaknesses, the reflective approach enables prospective teachers to integrate theory and practice. It gives them the opportunity to plan their personal and professional development.

Whereas writing in classrooms is an essential requirement, writing outside the classroom can be a useful tool to enhance writing skill (Chandrasegaran, 2002). Keeping journals at home is a good way to practice writing. Journal writing is a very interesting instructional tool, useful in ESL/EFL writing classes. It is not used only as a class startup activity, but primarily to give students an opportunity to think deeply on paper, confident that their ideas, emotions, observations, and writing will be accepted without criticism. It helps them to summarize ideas, experience and opinions before and after instruction. ESL/EFL students are provided with sources for language and writing improvement. Through journal writing, students and teachers communicate regularly over a semester, school year or course.

3. Topics of Journals

The topics of journals can be suggested by teacher. Students are allowed to write about any topic of their own interest which fits their needs and abilities. They often write about events or things that are somehow related to their daily lives and therefore it fosters their engagement and interest in writing. (Peyton, 1987). When students are at loss for thoughts, it is vital to suggest some topics but it is necessary to realize that as teachers we should provide students with ideas for writing which are comfortable for them to write about. The length of each entry in the journal depends on learners and their level of English but the minimum number of sentences should be always stated by teacher beforehand. Some people may suggest that this approach make students dependent on their teacher. On the contrary, Staton states that

interactive writing does not lead to dependence on the teacher, but to greater independence in communication. A learner, who might write very brief entries at the beginning, learns the strategies for elaborating on a topic by observing and participating. Consequently, he or she gradually takes on the teacher's role discussing a topic by writing more complex, elaborated, and independent entries. (Dialogue Journals, 1983). The time devoted to writing Journal can be placed at the very beginning of each class but often students write at the end of lessons.

4. Types of Journals

There are three types of journals which can be used in ESL/EFL settings. They are dialogue journals, literary journals and subject journals. *Dialogue journals* serve as way of conversation written down but they also provide ESL students with sources for language and writing improvement. (Peyton, 1987). In *literary journals*, students respond to particular paragraph from a literary text. They are encouraged to extend their knowledge of literature itself, they can analyse characters or examine the topic and theme. (Cobine, 1995). Cobine states that *subject journals*, serve as responses to background readings such as biographies, or personalized dictionary of literary and linguistic terms. There is another type of journal that suites teachers' needs, an *idea journal*. It is kept for planning, putting down ideas for our classes so that they will not fly away.

5. Integration of Journal Writing into ESL/ EFL Classes

Teachers have to make journals both effective and beneficial in their classes. They have to be enthusiastic and engaging so as to have positive influence on making learners unconsciously keen on journal writing. The need to persuade their learners that journal writing is fun and they will enjoy it. It is necessary to familiarize learners with this type of writing. It should be explained to them that journal writing is good for practicing writing. Learners have to be explicitly told that journals are private, that no one else will read what is written in them so as to make learners comfortable when they write. The teachers should also state that topics can be chosen freely with no boundaries and can

provide them with suggestions for writing in case they are at loss of ideas .

6. Positive Aspects of Using Journals

Journals are very useful in ESL/EFL writing classes. Through journals teachers let their students access more interesting and engaging ways of writing and consequently make them like writing, feel more comfortable and confident. Students who are writing journals, write longer and more complex sentences with more words compared to students who are not writing journals. when using journal in teaching and learning, teachers are able to simultaneously integrate reading and writing skills into one activity. Writing a journal will help students to develop the habit of thinking on paper and show how ideas can be created and developed in the process of writing. A journal can make writing a familiar part of students' life and can serve as a continuing source of ideas for papers.

7. Activities for Journal Writing

The following journal writing activities can be introduced into the class as a different kind of class writing . They are additional tools in order to help ESL/EFL students develop their writing skills. This is a similar idea to a 'learner diary', where students regularly reflect on what they have learnt in classes, and the way that activities in class have helped them to learn. Here are some suggested activities:

- **Personalised journal entry:** Students write self- introduction letters at the beginning of the course. During the course, they can write about key things in their lives: the media they read, watch and listen to; their free time activities; the things they own; the people who admire the most.
- **Reflecting on your learning:** Dictate some sentence stems about learning, e.g.: 'The thing I enjoy most about writing classes is ...' etc. Then they compare theirs with their partners' writings.
- **Character writing:** Students read or listen to a story. They adopt different viewpoints within the story and write about them.
- **Happiness diary:** Students chart their happiness (or lack of it) over the previous

week; they write about why they felt like that.

- **Vocabulary stories :** Students pull vocabularies out of the class 'word bag'; in groups they have to construct a story and write it in their journals, before reading it out to other students.

8. CONCLUSION

This article highlights the benefits of journal writing in ESL/EFL classes as a good activity to enhance learners' writing skill . Journal writing is considered to be one type of creative writing that can help students brainstorm ideas and write more competently and accurately. It can also bring about another benefit that classroom writing can infrequently do. While in-class writing tasks make students nervous, journal writing can reduce the distance between the students and their teacher.

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