

JOURNAL WRITING AS A TECHNIQUE FOR DEVELOPING WRITING SKILLS

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Writing skill is an important language skill that is very essential for students at the tertiary level. In particular, students studying in engineering colleges need high level of proficiency in writing skills as far as their academic and workplace situations are concerned. At the tertiary level, it is a challenging job for the teachers to identify and use productive teaching techniques to improve the writing skills of the students. The present study is an experimental study comparing the performance of the students exposed to journal writing with that of the students exposed to traditional practice of teaching writing. This paper reports the findings of the study and discusses the reasons for positive impact of journal writings on the writing skills of the experimental group.

Keywords: journal writing, techniques, writing skills, traditional practice of writing.

Introduction

According to a data released by the Anna University (Chennai), out of the 1,73,687 eligible applicants, 92,731 are first generation graduates, who will be competing with over 80,000 students for the nearly two lakh seats in colleges affiliated to the university (The Hindu 2014). It is a positive trend to know that more than fifty percent of the students with unfavorable educational and social background opt for engineering education. Though the data is not clear about the exact number students with mother tongue medium and rural background, it can be claimed logically that majority of the these students are from the mother tongue medium schools with rural background. These students with low proficiency in English have to cope with English medium education in engineering colleges. Teachers of English need to use suitable methods and language strategies to help these students improve their language proficiency.

Students with low proficiency in English cannot do well in the written examination despite their sound knowledge in science and engineering subjects. Even in project report writing, they struggle a lot because of lack of written communication skills. The poor status of the writing skills of these students can be ascribed to the memory based questions in the school examination system and the lack of chances for them to practice writing in their own words. At the tertiary level, the writing requirements are different and they are expected to write suitable answers for the analytical questions in the examination. According to Rao Zhenhui (2007), writing is a difficult task for students because the writing process involves

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many cognitive and linguistic strategies of which they are uncertain. Many students complain that they lack ideas and cannot think of anything interesting or significant enough to write. Most of the teachers are often perplexed by these problems and they cannot find an efficient way to awaken students' imagination and set their minds working. The demands of the entirely new academic situation at the tertiary level force the teachers to exploit the uses of effective teaching writing techniques.

The traditional practice of teaching writing that is widely followed in most of the engineering colleges does not seem to give the desired results. In this practice, a topic is given without paying any attention to the students' interest towards that topic and they are directed to write a paragraph or an essay. The prewriting strategies like brainstorming, peer interaction, and teacher student interaction are rarely used to generate ideas and to clarify their doubts regarding the topic. Corrective feedback from the teacher is not an essential component in traditional teaching writing practice. The drawbacks of this writing practice make the students develop disinterest towards writing activities. Their negative mindset can be transformed into the positive one by using some teaching techniques that have a concern for the needs and interests of the students.

Journal writing that differs from traditional practice of writing in several respects will sustain the motivational level of the students in writing tasks and improve their writing skills significantly. Journal writing benefits the students in several ways and it primarily enhances their self-expression. The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines 'self-expression' as the expression of one's thoughts and feelings, especially through activities such as writing, painting and dancing. Journal writing becomes a platform for the individuals to reveal their thoughts and feelings. This medium can be effectively utilized to create an interest among the students in writing activities. It can be used to nurture their passion for writing and make the students show their involvement and enthusiasm in writing activities.

Journal writing (Porter *et al.* 1990; Todd, Richard Watson *et al.* 2001) can be viewed as a dialogue between learners and the teacher. Writers write for a set of audience whereas teacher is the ultimate audience for the journal written by the learner and he gives his feedback or comments on the journal. Roe and Stallman (1994) mentioned two types of journals - dialogue journals and response journals and highlighted the difference between the two. Dialogue journals are journals written for the teacher to read and comment on whereas response journals, which are just a reaction to a text, are not written for any target audience. Their study conducted to study the reactions of the students towards the two types concluded that dialogue journals were preferred because of the advantage of feedback from the teacher.

Writing in general can be described as a process of 'exploring one's thoughts and learning from the act of writing itself what these thoughts are' (Zamel 1982).

Journal writing focuses on thinking skills, especially, problem solving skills and creative thinking skills and these are essential skills for any workplace situation. There are a number of benefits because of the practice of journal writing. Most learners gain experience with the writing or recording procedures. When students are given topics related to social issues for journal writing practice, they are forced to apply problem solving skills and creative thinking skills. Creative thinking can be defined as a way of looking at problems or situations from a fresh perspective for innovative solutions. It encourages a person to think positively and come out with amicable solutions.

Moreover, journal writing creates a friendly and non-threatening atmosphere since the students have the freedom to select topics for writing. Here, teacher is not playing a dominant role but he is performing the role of a facilitator in this writing activity. He gives corrective feedback regarding the journal writing scripts without hurting their feelings. The feedback does not aim to kill the creative thinking skills but to improve their writing skills in general. In brief, the teacher is very sympathetic and he tries to help them in all possible ways. So, the students do not feel embarrassed when the teacher gives corrective feedback related to content, grammatical errors and logical presentation of ideas and language style. The general guidelines regarding feedback on journals (Todd, Richard Watson *et al.* 2001) that were taken into account for this study are: (1) A general comment at the end of the journal is not sufficient. Instead feedback should be related to specific points in the journal either through in-text comments or through footnotes on a separate piece of paper. (2) Useful comments that aim to give suggestions and add information can be given to build relationships between teacher and the participant. (3) Comments on all specific points of journals are appreciated.

The aim of the study is to find out whether journal writing is a useful teaching technique in developing the writing skills of the students after the ten journal writing sessions followed by corrective feedback from the researcher. The present study tries to improve the writing skills of the students with a special focus on the aspects such as content generation, logical development of ideas, grammar and language style (sentence structures).

Method

Participants

Subjects selected for the study were 40 first year Undergraduate Chemical Engineering students from Anna University in Chennai, India. The criterion applied to identify the Low English Proficient (LEP) students for this study was fixed as less than 55 per cent marks in the first English test with test items like paragraph writing and some grammar aspects conducted by the course instructor. The range of marks scored by students in the test was between 45 and 54.

Procedure

The study involves four stages such as pre-test, writing sessions, post-test and analysis. The pre-test was conducted to assess the writing skills of the students and identify the requirements of the students in view of their writing skills. Based on the pre-test results, teaching writing sessions were planned for the control and experimental groups. Traditional writing sessions were conducted for the control group consisting of 20 students whereas journal writing sessions were conducted for the experimental group having the remaining 20 students. Meanwhile, corrective feedback focusing on the following aspects - content, logical development of ideas, grammar and language style was given to both the groups after each session.

After the ten writing sessions, the post-test was conducted to find out whether there was any improvement in the writing skills of the control group and experimental group. The statistical test (t-test) was applied to see whether there was any significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the two groups.

Results

Pre-test

'My school life' was the topic given for the pre-test for the control group and experimental group. The major reason for choosing this topic is that it may not pose much difficulty to the students. They need not refer any book for writing about school life. They have to recollect the happy school life and narrate their experiences in an interesting manner. It is a happy journey to think about the past and share their thoughts with friends. In informal occasions, people like to describe various incidents from their school life. These reasons have made the researcher select this topic for pre-test.

The four criteria used for assessing the performance of the students in the pre-test were (i) content, (ii) grammar, (iii) logical development of ideas, and (iv) language style. The maximum marks for each criterion was five marks and the maximum marks for the test was twenty marks. To maintain objectivity in the evaluation procedures, the evaluation work was done by two evaluators – the researcher and an experienced faculty member. Table 1 presents the marks scored by students in the pre-test. The first row shows the marks out of 20 scored by students of the control group whereas the second row shows the marks out of 20 scored by students of the experimental group.

TABLE 1: PRE-TEST MARK OF THE TWO GROUPS

Control group (out of 20 marks)	8	7	10	11	12	13	14	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	11	8	7	6	11	10
Experimental group (out of 20 marks)	8	9	11	12	13	12	11	12	9	8	6	5	5	7	7	7	8	9	10	11

Observations in the Pre-Test

The performance of the students in the pre-test conveys certain facts that need to be taken into account while planning teaching writing sessions for the students. The facts that deserve attention are:

- Students show much involvement in writing when they are assigned with a familiar topic for writing. The given topic may not pose much difficulty.
- They express their thoughts or opinions related to the topic with high level of self-confidence in a non-threatening atmosphere.
- There are many grammatical errors in their writing. It shows that they do not have enough knowledge in Basic English grammar. It is necessary to make them focus on simple grammar rules.
- Most of them seem to give less importance to logical development of ideas. They need to be aware of the fact that a written material is readable only when the ideas are developed logically. Teachers have to make them focus on concepts like coherence and cohesion.
- Language style is the next important aspect that demands much attention as far as the writing skills are concerned. Inadequate vocabulary and less exposure to sentence structures become the major reasons for poor language style. So, journal writing sessions can involve the aspects like vocabulary and sentence structures.

Writing Sessions for the Control Group

About 10 writing sessions, each session with the duration of 2 hours, based on traditional practice of teaching were conducted for the control group. The researcher identified 10 topics for writing sessions and the students had no role in the selection of topics. The topics selected for sessions are as follows:

- (1) Noise pollution
- (2) Air pollution
- (3) Water pollution
- (4) Alternative energy sources
- (5) Nuclear energy
- (6) Unemployment in rural areas
- (7) Illiteracy
- (8) Energy conservation
- (9) Anti-ragging campaign in the campus
- (10) Uses of library

In each writing session, the students were given a topic from the list and were asked to write an essay with a word limit of 300 words. Pre-writing strategies like brain storming or peer group interaction were not used for content generation since it was assumed that students had some previous knowledge about the topics listed for the sessions. Finally the researcher gave his feedback to the students after each session in the form phrases like 'good', 'very good', 'satisfactory', 'bad ' and 'very bad'.

Writing Sessions for Experimental Group

The journal writing sessions were conducted for the experimental group consisting of 20 students. About ten sessions of journal writing, each session with the duration of 2 hours, were conducted. After discussing with the students, the following topics were identified for journal writing sessions. They are:

- (1) My college life
- (2) Your favourite person
- (3) Your first day at a new college or school
- (4) If I am an invisible boy or girl, ——
- (5) A vacation trip
- (6) My best friend
- (7) A disastrous date
- (8) My favourite food
- (9) The last ten minutes of a game
- (10) A memorable wedding

In journal writing sessions, the role of the teacher was a significant one and he assumed the role of a counselor and a friend. The change in the role of the teacher was to enhance the relationship between the teacher and students. They could clarify their doubts without fear. The cordial relationship indirectly could reduce tension and negative stress experienced by students in language classes. Each writing session was followed by corrective feedback by the teacher to improve the writing skills of the students. In the writing sessions, the teacher was not simply an evaluator of the learner's journal but he assumed various roles such as 'audience', 'assistant' (Tribble 1996), 'consultant' (Dheram 1995), or 'reader' (Keh 1990).

Post-Test

After the journal writing sessions, the post-test was conducted to find out whether there was any development in their writing skills. The following topics were given for the post-test:

- (1) A day when everything went wrong
- (2) Your first time away from home
- (3) An experience that made you laugh until you cried

Students had to choose one of these topics for the post-test. These topics were selected because they were related to their personal life incidents. They could express their feelings, opinions and attitudes related to the above said topics.

In the post-test, the same evaluation procedure followed in the pre-test was used to assess the writing skills of the students. The four criteria used for assessing the performance of the students were (i) content, (ii) grammar, (iii) logical development of ideas, and (iv) language style. The maximum marks for each criterion was 5 marks and the maximum marks for the test was 20 marks. The post-test was conducted for both the control group and experimental group. Table 2 presents the marks scored by students in the post-test. The first row shows the marks out of 20 scored by students of the control group whereas the second row shows the marks out of 20 scored by students of the experimental group.

TABLE 2: POST-TEST MARK OF THE TWO GROUPS

Control group (out of 20 marks)	9	8	10	9	10	12	12	12	11	10	8	9	7	5	10	9	9	5	11	9
Experimental group (out of 20 marks)	12	13	14	15	15	14	13	14	11	12	10	9	9	10	10	9	10	11	11	12

Performance in the Pre-Test and Post- Test: A Comparison

The performance of the two groups in the pre-test and post-test was analyzed using ‘t-test’ to find out whether there was any significant difference between these groups in terms of their writing skills. Table 3 depicts the following aspects – mean, standard deviation, t-value and significance for pre-test and post-test.

TABLE 3: PERFORMANCE IN THE PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST USING T-TEST

Group	Pre-test			Post-test		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Control group	20	9.20	2.48	20	9.25	2.00
Experimental group	20	9.00	2.43	20	11.70	2.00

(N= Number of participants; SD= Standard Deviation)

The unpaired t- test (two tailed) for the pre-test shows that there was no significant difference between the performance of the students of the control and experimental groups. It was found that the difference between the groups (control group, t = 0.2575, df = 38, p = 0.7982) was not statistically significant.

The unpaired t- test (two tailed) for the post-test shows that there was significant difference between the performance of the students of the control and experimental groups. It was found that the difference between the groups (control group, $t = 3.8744$, $df = 38$, $p = 0.0004$) was statistically significant.

The pre-test comparison showed that the difference between two groups was not statistically significant in terms of their performance. But the post-test comparison revealed that the difference between two groups was statistically significant in terms of their performance. There were several positive aspects that were present in journal writing sessions given for experimental group. One of them was that students had the freedom to select topics for journal writing whereas the teacher gave the topics for writing for the students of control group. The next one was the role of the teacher for the experimental group and the friendly and helpful attitude of the teacher built better rapport between teacher and the students. The corrective feedback from the teacher on journals had a positive impact on the development of writing skills of the students. These factors had played a great role in nurturing the writing skills of the experimental group students.

It was observed that there was a considerable improvement in the writing skills of the experimental group students as far as their performance in the post-test was concerned. The comparison confirmed that the experimental group had performed better than control group after the 10 writing sessions. But the use of traditional practice of teaching writing for the control group had not brought about the same kind of effect made by journal writing sessions. It can be inferred that journal writing is a useful teaching technique to develop the writing skills of the students at the tertiary level.

Conclusion

The study using journal writing as a teaching technique confirmed the desirable development in the writings of the students. There was improvement in the following aspect -content, grammar, logical development of ideas, and language style. It also indicated that the experimental group members who had participated in the journal writing sessions outperformed the control group members who had participated in the traditional practice of writing sessions. The application of t-test showed that the difference between the two groups in terms of their performance in the post-test was statistically significant. To conclude, the use of journal writing sessions had a positive impact on the writing skills of the students.

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