

Learners' Voices on Journal Writing

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1. Introduction

Recently, many language teachers (Burton & Carroll, 2001; Barfield, 2003; Casanave, 1993; Carroll, 1994; Duppenthaler, 2004) have encouraged learners to record their learning experiences through journals in target languages. The types of recommended journal styles vary from dialogue journals, class journals, academic journals, response journals and secret pal journals. Journal writing not only provides a chance for students to practice using the target language, it can also be a valuable tool to make them aware of their learning in class, as well as what they need to do outside of class (Carroll, 1994; Cresswell, 2000; Matsumoto 1996; Richards & Ho, 1993). Students' own opinions towards journal writing provide the basic data of this paper. First, students' own words are used to demonstrate their views on the journal writing process and are summarized into the following five categories: usefulness, continuance, habit formation, recommendation, and compulsory point. Next, five reasons are given to explain why a few students dislike journal writing. Finally, the students' expectation of the teacher's role in the process of journal writing is examined.

2. Literature Review

Learning journals and diaries are seen as a useful means to help learners self-monitor, self-assess and become critically reflective (Cotteral, 1995; Nunan, Lai & Keobke, 1999; Usuki, 2001; Yang 2005a). Lor (2001) monitored the writings of 12 students each of whom wrote 10 or more entries in reflective journals in order to answer the following questions: 1) what kinds of things do students reflect upon; and 2) to what extent could their journal entries be described as reflective. She analyzed journals from the following four categories of objects of reflection: 1) learning events or situations; 2) the learners' role in the learning process; 3) the learners' feelings about learning and learning events; 4) learning gains, difficulties encountered in the process of learning, and decisions and plans. Lor concluded that the students in her study found the process of reflection in journal writing difficult. They were often unsure what they should write and looked to her for guidance. With some exceptions, their journal entries were neither well integrated nor

transformative. Teachers would serve their students better by providing students with challenging experiences that provoke deeper reflection and provide opportunities to discuss the processes of learning that arise from those experiences. The study suggests, however, that for many language learners positive or negative feelings are often the starting point for conscious reflection. "Reflections upon positive feelings can confirm the learner's sense of the rightness of a plan. Negative feelings about learning experiences can become occasions for deeper reflection leading to changes in the plan" (Benson, 2001: 207).

Nachi (2002), Usuki (2001), Yang (2005a) also used a journal or diary system throughout the semester to allow students to record classroom activities and their reactions to those activities as well as their language learning in general. Yang (2005a, p.91) pointed out that in the Japanese EFL learning context, when we apply journal writing as a way to encourage learner autonomy, being aware of "learner individual difference, invisible affect, long-term practice, and teacher's working conditions" may be helpful to teachers and other researchers. .

However, most of the above papers have been written from the point of view of teachers, and few have investigated the viewpoint of learners. What's more, there are few reports on the changes that students may or may not undergo when keeping journal writing over an extended period of time. Therefore, in this paper, after assigning learning journals for an academic year, students' self-evaluation reports were collected in order to obtain learners' opinions about journal writing, which has provided insights for the improvement of the practice in the future.

3. Main Practice

3.1 Background

I assigned learning journals to 27 lower-intermediate sophomore college students in one oral communication class as a part of their weekly homework. After an academic year, 558 journal entries (228 for the first semester and 330 for the second semester) and 25 final reports (see Appendix 1) were collected. The students' final reports evaluating their journal writing provide the main data for this research.

Since the main focus of this class is oral communication, we could not spend a lot of time in class on writing, so I asked students to continue writing their weekly journals as a part of homework outside of class. I collected their writings at the beginning of each class, gave my comments on the content and returned them the following week. I seldom corrected mistakes as long as the mistakes did not interfere with the meaning, since the purpose of the journal project was to stimulate and monitor students' self-study. It was not easy for students to understand what they were supposed to write, so at the beginning, I asked them to write at least five sentences on the week's self-study assignment. The topic could be about anything connected with the usage of the language or they could use the hints that I provided to guide their journal writing (see Appendix 2). Then, occasionally I showed them some good examples of entries that other students had written in order to demonstrate what they were capable of writing and to help them

build their confidence.

3.2 Research questions and analysis of learners' reports

In this study, three research questions are considered.

Research question 1: How did students evaluate journal writing?

Research question 2: What are the reasons that students who disliked journal writing or felt that they were unable to write an effective journal?

Research question 3: What did the students expect of the teacher during the journal writing program?

3.2.1 Research question 1

In this section, I will examine the students' evaluation of journal writing and their understanding of the journal writing process.

3.2.1.1 Usefulness

Almost all of the students in this study agreed that journal writing was a useful learning tool. Not only did it allow them to use English every day, but through the writing process, they began to understand many of their learning weaknesses and discovered more suitable learning strategies.

Excerpt 1

I think journal is useful for me, because I could practice for writing. I don't write English normally. I also didn't like to write because I am poor at grammar.

Excerpt 2

Learning journal is useful for me, because it makes me study English in various ways. I think that I learned to write a lot of English sentences fluently and happily. I owe it to spend studying more time while writing journals.

Excerpt 3

It is very useful. Because I noticed that I can express my opinions. I didn't know I can do it before. I use English when I write learning journals, and I am thinking in English. There are no Japanese.

Excerpt 4

Learning journal is comfortable for me to use English. After I began to write journals, I feel carefree thinking in English. Studying for me becomes easier.

Some of them mentioned that they usually did not use English at all outside of class, but through journal writing, they began to use English for the first time.

3.2.1.2 Continuance

Many of them also indicated their willingness to continue writing learning journals even after the course was finished. That is to say that some, like the following student, realized that journal writing was helpful for their learning and was a very enjoyable activity.

Excerpt 5

I would like to continue writing a journal. It is hard to do, but I think it is good for me. I want to get used to do it. If I can do it continually, my English skill would be up and I might have confidence.

3.2.1.3 Habit

One student mentioned that habit formation was very important for English study. Probably at the starting point, it is hard to record their learning experience in English, but once it becomes a habit, it becomes much easier with practice.

Excerpt 6

Writing learning journals seems to be rather hard. But once I get used to writing them, they were not the burden. It is quite difficult to think about the attitude toward studying English voluntarily. So forming a habit is important.

3.2.1.4 Recommendation

It is interesting to notice that almost all of the students in this class, including a few who dislike writing themselves, recommend journal writing to the students who will take a similar class next year because they believe that it will be beneficial for other English learners. Here are a few examples.

Excerpt 7

I would like to recommend learning journals to the students who will take the same class next year for good reasons. According to take it, first, they will discover their strong and weak points in English. Second, they will think how to develop strong points and overcome weak points, and carry out the way. It will exactly help their English ability developed. The most important thing is how hard they make effort toward it. Their English ability depends on their efforts.

Excerpt 8

It is hard, but people would start self-study. Studying time will be increase. All students have to study.

Excerpt 9

I recommend it to other people because they can find the way of English studying like me, make their dreams or find more big things for them. Maybe they take their times and troubles and there are many parts that they bear. But the harder you try to do it, the more you will get from it.

3.2.1.5 Compulsory points

The original aim of assigning journal writing is to foster learner autonomy. If learner autonomy is defined as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning, and to take charge of one’s own learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all decisions concerning all aspects of learning” (Holec, 1981), then requiring the students to develop autonomous learning at the beginning seems a bit of a contradiction. However, it could be explained as one of the characteristics of learner autonomy of Japanese students as Yang indicates (2005b, 75), “learner need to be guided when we implement our autonomous learning”.

Excerpt 10

If it is not a homework, I think I skip it.

Excerpt 11

A lot of students don’t like to be forced to do something. So at first as a homework, I did not like it. Gradually, when I felt that I could write my opinions freely and fluently, I guess I changed the attitude toward journal writing. So if the teacher doesn’t force us to do, I won’t even give it try at the beginning.

Students also contradict themselves. On the one hand, they dislike teachers who force them to do things, such as homework assignments, but on the other hand, they understand that most of them are lazy and admit that if the teachers do not give required assignments, students will often do nothing. Therefore, once again, it is necessary to emphasize, in Japan, learner autonomy should be implemented phase by phase. At the beginning of a new practice, enforcement and a rejection of student complaints is necessary if the teacher believes it is good for students. To let students understand its effectiveness takes time and patience. Sometimes disagreement is only an excuse for laziness and hesitancy to face a new challenge.

In a word, most students believe that journal writing is helpful and express a desire to continue writing even after the course has finished. Although they mentioned that they did not like homework, they still admitted that journal writing was a good activity for them to use English and that they learned a lot from writing with the teacher, so strong guidance from the teacher is necessary.

3.2.2 Research question 2

Not every opinion is positive in students’ final report. Among 30 students, there were eight who

insisted that they disliked weekly journal for the following reasons:

3.2.2.1 Poorness at grammar

They felt helpless when they did not know the expressions they wanted to use, and the more they wrote, the more unable they felt they were. So from this aspect, writing itself discouraged some of them as the following student.

Excerpt 12

I didn't like to write because I am poor at grammar, so it was hard for me to continue to write a journal.

3.2.2.2 No schedule

One of the students said "I do not like to study too much scheduling. It is because of becoming unmotivated and becoming boring if the plan collapses". He didn't want to be controlled by the task of writing something in English every week, and he felt more discouraged especially when he was not able to carry out the plan that he had created.

3.2.2.3 Burden

For many students who had expressed their negative comments, journal writing became a burden for them. They felt it was a burden at the time when they had other assignments to finish, when they were tired of their part-time jobs, when they had nothing special to write on, and when they were tired of doing the same thing everyday.

Excerpt 13

Learning journal is a burden for me. But the reason may be I didn't have an enthusiasm.

Excerpt 14

Learning journal is a little burden for me. I do a similar thing every week, so sometimes I have nothing to write.

Excerpt 15

It is difficult to continue by myself every day without I was forced to do as a homework.

3.2.2.4 No topics

Life as a student is relatively uneventful, the students sometimes feel that it is difficult to find interesting topics to share. At such a time, they often lose interest to write naturally like the following student.

Excerpt 16

I feel that hardly as a day passes, because I didn't have topics to write my journal.

3.2.2.5 Unsuitableness

Still, there are two students who hate writing for no reasons.

Excerpt 17

I wouldn't like to continue writing journals, because this method isn't suitable for me.

From the above comments, it is not hard for us to understand that why some of the students do not like journal writing. From their opinions, some improvement can be implemented for future journal writing projects. For example, concerning grammatical study, we can summarize some typical grammatical mistakes from their journal entries and require students to pay attention in the next writing. For those who said it was hard to find topics, we can suggest some topics and themes to write on. For those who dislike writing itself, we may provide them some other activities that they may favor, such as oral practice or peer-working activities. We need to remember that journal writing is not the only useful way to encourage learner autonomy and may not be suitable for some students.

3.2.3 Research question 3

In this part, students' expectation toward teachers in the process of journal writing will be summarized.

3.2.3.1 Correction of grammatical mistakes

All of the students wrote the journals think that they were writing to the teacher and focused on grammatical accuracy rather than content. Many students felt that the teacher was responsible for correcting grammatical mistakes. The following comments are very representative.

Excerpt 18

I am not writing wonderful content so much. I will try and write correct grammar. Therefore, I am welcome in the correction of grammar mistakes.

Excerpt 19

I understood my grammar mistake at once and helped by the teacher's correction because the teacher saw neatly every week.

3.2.3.2 Comments on their writing

Usually, as a teacher, I respond quickly and naturally and as closely as possible to the way I would respond in a conversation. I was more interested in the content than the grammar and believe that an overemphasis on grammar may interfere with the communication between the students and teacher that is essential in the journal writing process. More than half of the class mentioned that they enjoyed reading my comments and impressions towards their writing. They

said they were quite motivated by the teacher's encouragement and praise.

Excerpt 20

I want the impression of my report from the teacher, I was always looking forward to the comments on my diary. My teacher always gives me wonderful comment, which encourage me to write more.

Excerpt 21

Comments from the teacher is encouraging me. I want to read teacher's impression or feeling of my learning journal. Teacher's messages bring motive to continue writing.

Excerpt 22

I was encouraged by the teacher's various praises lot. Even sometimes it is not related with English study, I was moved and always enthusiastic to do more.

3.2.3.3 Teacher's critics

There is only one student in this class who wished that the teacher had been stricter. Apparently, the student believes that journal writing is an effective language learning tool and that he would benefit from a more critical teacher response.

Excerpt 23

There is about 40 students in this class, and you have other classes too. Are you tired of reading our poor and bad hands writing? So I think we should write journals which are to be interesting for readers. Sometimes, I wrote such a sentence 'It is fine, today,' or 'I have nothing special today', I must apologize you. When you find kind of them, you can write "dull" with red pen. I believe hard critic make us better English user.

3.2.3.4 Assessment

Most of the class members did not believe that teacher should give scores on their weekly journals as quoted in the following excerpts.

Excerpt 24

I don't want teacher's assessment. If the teacher gives a score on my writing, I probably loose confidence to continue it. If my writing is understandable, I don't need any correction either.

Excerpt 25

I don't want the teacher to mark on my writing. Otherwise, I will lose interest to write more personal things.

3.2.3.5 Questions

One student mentioned that she would like to communicate with the teacher by being asked questions as in the form of a student-teacher dialogue journal.

Excerpt 26

I like reading teacher's comments. If the teacher has any question, please use ? to show me. So I can answer the question in the next journal. I want to have a talk like this with the teacher.

3.2.3.6 Communication with the teacher

In Quirk (2001), the following opinion is offered on the benefit of journal writing, "I believe the greatest benefit of the journals is that they allow the language to become a true vehicle of communication for the students—for many of them, for the first time". Many of my students said they enjoyed talking with me through writing, and they felt very happy that I could share their learning experience. They regarded the ability to communicate with the teacher as the most important element in journal writing.

Excerpt 27

The most important point I think is to get communication with the teacher through learning journals. Teacher's comments give me a lot of encouragement and let me feel comfortable to ask questions.

Excerpt 28

I found my way of study and incidentally I could make a friend who can speak English, she is my English teacher, and she teaches many things.

Excerpt 29

I am very happy that I can share my writing and communicate with the teacher.

4. Conclusion

This paper, based on students' own opinions about journal writing, has demonstrated students' understanding toward journal writing from five categories: usefulness, continuance, habit formation, recommendation and compulsory point. Also it has given five reasons on why some students dislike journal writing. For example, some of them felt they were poor at grammar. Busy schedule, burden, nothing to write on and unsuitableness are also mentioned by students who dislike this assignment. Last, teachers' role in applying journal writing as a means to encourage learner autonomy are summarized from points of view of students: 1) many students are expecting their teachers to check their grammatical mistakes; 2) teachers' comments on the contents of their writing are welcome; 3) teachers' critics on their laziness will be helpful;

4) teachers' more questions on their writing will encourage them to write more; 5) no one likes their writing being marked by their teachers; and 6) they regard weekly journals as a way to communicate with the teacher.

The results of students' evaluations indicate that weekly journals are beneficial for most of the students, and more importantly, the students themselves seem to understand the value of the journal writing process. However, as Yang (2005a) mentions, because of the existence of individual differences, it is important to remember that journal writing is not the only way to encourage students' learner autonomy. Therefore, in the future, portfolio and other projects, which allow students to produce a variety of text-types and give students greater freedom, should be considered.

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Appendix 1 Self-evaluation report on journal writing

Student Code _____ Name _____

1. Is learning journal useful for you? 役に立ちますか? どんなところ?
2. Is learning journal a burden for you? 強制的に宿題として書かせるのについての意見?
好き、嫌い、負担になった?
3. Do you think you changed a lot by writing journals? 最初に書いたときと今(4ヶ月後)
と比べたら、自分自身はどこかが変わりましたか?
Are you able to write fluently? 流暢に書けるようになった?
Do you study more while writing journals and learning record? Do they change your study
habits in the long term? 勉強時間が増えましたか? 学習習慣が変わりましたか?
Do you think you are motivated by writing journals? もっと英語の勉強に対してやる気が
出た?
4. Are you able to control your study well by filling in learning records and writing journals?
書くことによって、自分の弱いところを分かって、勉強にもっと自己管理ができるよう
になった? 計画を立てて、コツコツやることとか?
5. Are you able to find some learning methods which are suitable for you? Are you able to find
good learning materials and use them for self-study? 自分にあう勉強法を見つけた? 授業
外、自分に合う教材を使って勉強できるようになった?
6. Do you think writing journals encourage your learning? 学習日記が書いて、勉強の励みに
なっていますか?
7. Are you able to take actions after you wrote to work hard next week? “来週頑張るわ”と
書いた後、実際に行動をとりますか?
8. Are you able to concentrate on your English study? How? 自分の勉強にどのくらい集中で
きますか?
9. What kind of comments you would like to have from the teacher? Journalを提出して、どん
なCommentsをもらいたいですか? 文法の間違いの直し? 先生の意見、感想? 評価しても
らいたい?
10. Do you want your classmates to read your journal entries? Why or why not? クラスメート
に見てほしいですか? なぜ?
11. Would you to continue writing your learning journals? Would you like to continue keeping
learning records? この授業を終わっても、Journalを自分で書き続けたいですか?
12. Would you like to recommend learning journals to the students who will take the same class
next year? 来年同じクラスを受ける人に学習日記をお勧めしますか?

Appendix 2 What Can You Write in Your Learning Journals?

(Original in English)

At the end of each day (or once or twice a week) write down what you feel you have learned since your last entry.

- ▷ You might want to comment on what you have been doing in the classroom.
 - * What did I learn today (could be a summary of the lesson)?
 - * What did I understand from today's lesson?
 - * I like (dislike) some activity we did today, and why?
- ▷ You might describe what your thoughts and feelings were about what you have done each day, or about something you have seen, or something that you have heard.
 - * Introduction on a foreign movie, a book, a song, a foreign friend (mail pals)
 - * a trip where I use English
 - * experience of using English outside of classroom
- ▷ You might want to describe something which you found difficult to understand, or some situation where someone else misunderstood you.
 - * culture difference
 - * different English
- ▷ You might want to say something on your self-study at home
 - * a good TV program you recommend
 - * a good way to improve English speaking/listening/reading/writing
 - * self-study at home
- ▷ You might tell us your dreams in the future
 - * go abroad
 - * get a higher score of TOEFL/TOEIC/EIKEN
 - * find a job using foreign languages

Appendix 3 Inventory of Learner Autonomy for Japanese EFL Learners

Self-initiative

1. I want to find a job where I can use English later.
2. I want to study in English-speaking countries in the future.
3. I enjoy studying English, so I learn it because I want to.
4. I look for opportunities to use English as much as possible.
5. I study English voluntarily.
6. I find information about English by myself, e.g. Study abroad.
7. I try to find as many ways as I can to improve my English.
8. I check my English proficiency by taking TOEIC or EIKEN voluntarily.
9. I think about my progress in learning English.

Making plans

10. I am determined to attain the target which I set for my English studies.
11. I make my schedule so I will have enough time to study English.
12. I prefer to plug away diligently at my English study.
13. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.
14. I carry out the plans I make (overall study, hence after os).

Self-control

15. Once the class starts, I feel like studying (os).
16. I check to make sure that I understood the lesson(os).
17. I pay more attention to the lessons if we are practicing something I am not so good at.
18. Before study or work, I consider a lot (os).
19. I reflect on what I learn and look for something important (os).
20. I try to improve my weaknesses (os).

Flexibility

21. I know the methods which suit me best and use them.
22. I make use of good material, e.g. Internet, when I study English at home.
23. I use time effectively (os).
24. I change my study content and target according to my needs
25. I try to have a good environment to study English, e.g. I clean up my table, when I study English at home.
26. I try to use other methods if the method of English study does not suit me (os).

Taking actions

27. If I decide to do something, I will act immediately (os).

- 28. I do things actively (os).
- 29. I try to complete the things I have decided to do (os).
- 30. I have all kinds of interests not limited to English.
- 31. I have a strong will and am not be easily influenced by others (os).

Concentration

- 32. I pay attention when someone is speaking in English.
- 33. I can study English no matter what mood I am in.
- 34. I concentrate on my studies even if I happen to hear other people talking (os).