

The Effect of Diary Writing on EFL College Students' Writing Improvement and Attitudes

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Abstract. Reviewing the English language writing courses in Iranian universities, one would find out that students feel themselves as poor writers and find writing difficult. These students are not able to communicate ideas effectively while they are familiar with the rules of paragraph writing and language form. Regarding the important rule of writing, the present study aimed to find whether incorporating diary writing can improve EFL college students' achievement and attitudes. Specifically, the present research reports an experience to find whether diary writing improve EFL college students' grammatical accuracy in writing and to investigate students' view regarding diary writing. Forty-four male participants were selected from all the available classes among the total population of 94 BA third- year students majoring in mechanical engineering at Petroleum University of Technology in Mahmoodabad. The results show that diary writing can be a very productive and creative pre writing activity for a writing classroom but there is not a significant relationship between the application of diary writing and the participants' improvement in writing as far as grammatical accuracy is concerned.

Key words: diary writing, attitude, writing, accuracy

1. Introduction

As the theory and practice of L2 composition gradually developed, the goals set out by language curriculum a major paradigm shift in teaching writing. More than any other issue in the field of composition studies, the shift from product to process has evoked strong passions (Spack, 1984). According to the proponents of 'process approach' (Kroll, 2006; Ghahremani-Ghajar and Mirhosseini, 2005; Marefat, 2001; Reagan, T.G. and Osborn, T.A., 2002; Zamel, 1983; Raimes, 1991; Montague, 1995) the previous approaches tended to be model – based and formulaic.

From demerits of the product approach, a process approach to teaching writing gradually emerged. Allwright (1983) points out that one technique for conducting classroom research is introspection. At this point, one may think of diary as an introspective research tool for initiation of writing and communicating meaning (Bailey, 1990; Porter et al. 1996). Some practitioners (Bailey, 1990; McDonough and McDonough, 1997) stress the significance of diaries in writing curriculum asserting that in writing a diary the content is under the control of the author, he has little worry about the style or grammar and it is a means for promoting autonomous learning. In a different use of diary, Porter et al. (1996) conclude that 'The journal enables students to develop a professional approach toward learning and to write as member of the larger language learning community. '(p.240)

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As Davis (1998) and Huang (2005) stated many of the students are familiar with the rules of writing and when they are being asked about the rules they are at best but they think that they are poor at writing. Therefore, these students do not experience any tangible and meaningful act of writing. On the other hand, they need to communicate in writing for different purposes. This study is conducted to evaluate EFL college students' grammatical development and their fluency in writing. To this end, the following questions were formulated.

Q1-Does diary writing significantly affect BA third- year EFL college students attitudes towards writing?

Q2-Does diary writing significantly improve BA third- year EFL college students grammatical accuracy in writing?

To examine the above research questions, three corresponding null hypotheses were formulated.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

In this study, 44 male participants were selected from the total population of 94 BA third – year students majoring in mechanical engineering at Petroleum University of technology in Mahmoodabad, Iran.

2.2. Instrumentation

To accomplish the task, the following instruments were employed: a standard First certificate English Test (FCE, 1999), two questionnaires, two expository writing tests, and a Michigan Examination for the certificate in English (MECPE, 1997). Of course, before administration of the test to the intended participants, all instruments were piloted in an 'English conversation class in a private institute to study their psychometric values.

2.3. Procedures

After eliciting the required data and ensuring the homogeneity of the groups, a test of expository writing was administered to both Experimental and control groups as a pre- test. Then, two raters scored the participants' papers. Next, the treatment was given to the experimental group. At the end of the treatment, the same test write a different topic was administered as the post- test to probe students' development in writing as far as fluency and grammatical accuracy concern.

Two questionnaires were also filled out by the experimental subjects on the pre-test and post- test to probe any significant shift in their attitudes towards writing. The papers and questionnaires were scored and the data were analyzed through the SPSS.

3. Results and Discussion

The data in this study were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. To probe the first null hypothesis suggesting that diary writing does not significantly affect BA third- year EFL college students attitudes towards writing, an analysis of chi-square was conducted. The results are reported in table 1 below.

Table 1: chi-square for the Questionnaires on attitude in pre- test and post- test

| Questionnaires | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|--------------------|--------------|---------------------------------|-------------|------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
| First (pre- test) | 57 11.5% | 108 21.8% | 89 18% | 47 9.5% | 60 12.1% | 13 20.8% | 31 6.3% |
| Second(post- test) | 138 27.5% | 144 28.7% | 99 19.8% | 21 4.2% | 24 4.8% | 61 12.2% | 14 2.8% |
| P 0/5<d. f=6 | | x ² -critical= 12/59 | | | | | |

As table 1 illustrates, the Chi-square observed- value, 81. 83, at 6 degrees of freedom exceeded the critical X²- value, i.e. 12/59 as demonstrated in this table, in the second questionnaire, the first, second and third choices are chosen more than the first questionnaire, while in the latter, the fourth, fifth, and sixth choices are selected more than the second questionnaire.

Thus, there are significant differences among the answers given to the two questionnaires and the corresponding null hypothesis is rejected.

Finally, to probe the second null hypothesis stating no significant effect of diary writing on the improvement of grammatical accuracy in EFL college students writing a MANOVA analysis was ran. As displayed in table 2, the F-observed value for the effect of grouping variable 6.26 exceeds the critical F-value, 4.08, at 1 and 42 degrees of freedom. The mean scores for the experimental group is 68.17, while the mean for the control group equals 60.06. As displayed in table 7, there is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test mean scores, experimental and control group, on the grammatical accuracy. The F-observed value, 28.55 at 1 and 42 degrees of freedom is greater than the critical F-value, i.e. 4.08. The results are reported in the following tables.

Table 2: Tests of Between- Subjects Effects

| Source of Variation | Sum of Square | d. f | Mean Square | F- observed | F- critical |
|---------------------|---------------|------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Group | 1414.21 | 1 | 1414.21 | 6.26 | 4.08 |
| Within cells | 9712.09 | 42 | 231.24 | | |

Table3: Tests of Within- Subjects Contrasts

| Sum of Variation | Sum of Square | d. f | Mean Square | F- observed | F- critical |
|---------------------------|---------------|------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Pretest/Posttest | 6992.05 | 1 | 6992.05 | 28.55 | 4.08 |
| Group by Pretest/Posttest | 0.18 | 1 | 0.18 | 0.001 | 4.08 |
| Within Cells | 5430.52 | 42 | 129.03 | | |

Table 4 displays the descriptive statistics for the two groups on the grammatical accuracy.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of the scores in grammatical accuracy

| Tests | Group | X | SD | N |
|------------|---------------|-------|-------|----|
| pre- test | Control Group | 61.65 | 13.43 | 22 |
| | Exp Group | 53.63 | 13.27 | 22 |
| | Total | 57.64 | 13.80 | 44 |
| post- test | Control Group | 74.70 | 13.42 | 22 |
| | Exp Group | 66.50 | 13.56 | 22 |
| | Total | 70.60 | 14.96 | 44 |

As displayed in this table, the mean scores for the pre-test and post-test are 57.64, and 70.60, respectively. The low F-value for the interaction between the grouping variable pre-test and post-test, .001 indicates that there is not any meaningful interaction between these variables. Later, to locate the exact differences, the post-hoc Scheffe's test was conducted. More details are presented in table 5.

Table 5: The Scheffe's tests for Comparing the Means of the Subjects in Different Tests for grammatical accuracy

| Dependent Variable | (I) CODE | Multiple (J) CODE | Comparisons Mean Difference (I-J) | Scheffe Std. Error | Sig. | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|--------------------|----------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|-------|-------------------------|-------------|
| | | | | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| Accuracy | Experimental Pretest | Control pretest | 8/0227 | 4/04822 | 0/277 | -3/5269 | 19/5724 |
| | | Exp posttest | -13/0455(*) | 4/04822 | 0/020 | -24/5951 | -1/4958 |
| | Control protest | Control posttest | -4/8409 | 4/04822 | 0/669 | -16/3905 | 6/7087 |
| | | Exp posttest | -21/0682(*) | 4/04822 | 0/000 | -32/6178 | 9/5186 |
| | Exp posttest | Control protest | -128636(*) | 4/04822 | 0/022 | -21/4133 | -1/3140 |
| | | Control protest | 8/2045 | 4/04822 | 0/258 | -3/3451 | 19/7542 |

The non-significant difference between the experimental posttest ($X=74.70$) with control posttest ($X=66.50$) indicated that the third null hypothesis is supported and it can be concluded that diary writing does not improve the grammatical accuracy of the EFL college students' writing.

Concerning the first null hypothesis, as presented in table 1, the statistics depicted that there is significant relationship between the application of diary writing and the students' attitudes towards writing. This finding goes in line with the general believes draws for diary studies (cf. Bailey, 1990 ; Porter et al , 1996 ; Callahan , 1997 ; McDonough and McDonough , 1997; Wallace , 1999) in which argue that writing diaries help students gain self-confidence, encourage more writing, and help them find writing interesting.

Regarding to the second null hypothesis, the statistics showed that diary does not help students develop their grammatical accuracy in writing. This finding is against the findings in Rainswat's study (1999) in which she compared students first 100 sentences and last 100 sentences to find their improvement as far as grammatical accuracy. To that end, her criterion for analysis was only sentence level and a set of predetermined grammatical structure.

4. Conclusions

A strait forward implication of the findings is that diary writing can be a very productive and creative pre-writing activity for a writing classroom. As different topics are assigned, writing a diary may foster reading and encourage students to read different topics/books/articles to gain ideas for the content and this may develop their reading as well as writing skill.

This study by emphasizing diary writing, that is a free writing where students can write freely without fear of being evaluated, paves the way for planning a communicative course of writing and can have a significant impact on EFL learners' attitudes towards writing.

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