

# Enhancing EFL Learners' Writing Skill via Journal Writing

Luu Trong Tuan

National University of Ho Chi Minh City

E-mail: luutrongtuan@hcm.fpt.vn

## Abstract

“Frequently accepted as being the last language skill to be acquired for native speakers of the language as well as for foreign/second language learners” (Hamp-Lyons and Heasley, 2006: 2), English writing, for a number of EFL learners, appears to be challenging. This paper sought to investigate if learners can grow out of the writing difficulties by engaging in journal writing activity. 85 second-year students from the two writing classes, one treated as the experimental group (EG) and the other as the control group (CG), at the Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City (USSH-HCMC) were invited to participate in the study, whose findings substantiated the benefits of journal writing as an extensive activity to foster learners' writing motivation and enhance their writing skill as well as to build a close bonding between teachers and learners.

**Keywords:** Journal writing, writing skill, Writing motivation, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners

## 1. Introduction

Out of the four fundamental language skills in the language learning process, “competent writing is frequently accepted as being the last language skill to be acquired for native speakers of the language as well as for foreign/second language learners.” (Hamp and Heasley, 2006: 2). EFL learners' success in English writing brings them benefits not solely in their English learning but also in their life-long careers as Glazier (1994: 3) contends, “Being able to write in English is essential in college, and it probably will be an asset in your career.” For numerous EFL learners, nonetheless, English writing appears to be challenging (Harmer, 1992: 53). In terms of fluency, Nunan (1999) maintains that producing a coherent, fluent, extended writing piece is likely the most difficult thing in language since the reader has to comprehend what has been written without asking for clarification or relying on the writer's tone of voice or expression.

The nature of writing itself is not interesting enough to motivate English learners to practice regularly (Hedge, 1991: 6). To a preponderance of EFL learners, nothing is more discouraging than doing a writing task and knowing that it will come under the eyes of the teacher, who will consider it as a source of errors to be corrected as Hamp and Heasley (2006: 2) states:

Few people write spontaneously and feel comfortable with a formal writing task intended for the eyes of someone else. When the "someone else" is the teacher, whose eyes may be critical, and who indeed may assign an individual assessment to the written product, most people feel uncomfortable.

Several students not purely encounter the insipidity in writing but find themselves in a hide-and-seek game with ideas as well since they normally have to write about what is assigned by their teacher rather than about what bears much relevance to them, as Byrne (1991: 5) pronounces, “Being at a loss for ideas is a familiar experience to most of us when we are obliged to write” and Tho (2000: 36) echos that sentiment, “Non-native writers may not have enough ideas to write down or, even worse, they have nothing to say.”

Above and beyond the dearth of motivation, time pressure also hinders learners' writing effectiveness. In the EFL classroom, students tend to be compelled to perform their writing tasks within a certain length of time. Thus, numerous students occasionally can not accomplish their tasks. Weir (1990: 61) gives an understanding glimpse:

Time pressure is often an unrealistic constraint for extended writing and writing timed essays is not normally done outside of academic life. For most people the writing process is lengthier and may involve several tasks before a finished version is produced.

In this respect, Chandrasegaran (2002: 14) indicates, “A problem to be expected in the writing classroom is that some students take much longer than others to write the required parts of the essay. Many never finish their writing in class.”

This study sought to explore if learners can grow out of the aforementioned difficulties by engaging in journal writing based on Lagan's (2000: 14) comment on its value:

Because writing is a skill, it makes sense that the more you practise writing, the better you will write. One excellent way to get practice writing, even before you begin composing essays, is to keep a daily or almost daily journal.

The research was, therefore, guided by the two subsequent research questions:

- 1) Can journal writing enhance students' writing skill in terms of fluency and accuracy?
- 2) Can journal writing generate students' writing motivation?

## **2. Review on journal writing**

Whereas classroom writing is an essential academic requirement, writing outside the classroom can be a useful tool to enhance writing skill (Chanderasegaran, 2002: 14). One way to practice writing at home is keeping journals which "are notebooks in which writers keep a record of ideas, opinions, and description of daily life. Journals help writers develop their creativity" Spaventa (2000: 168).

Journal writing helps learners write better and better day by day since it provides learners with more opportunities to freely write about what they wish to whenever they feel like writing as Hamp and Heasley (2006: 5) advocate:

The most obvious way you can help yourself become a good writer is by writing. We strongly suggest that in addition to completing the tasks, you also keep your own personal journal. Buy yourself a notebook, and try to write down some ideas every day, in English, about anything that interests you (...). You will surprise yourself by producing pages and pages of writing.

The fact that students are given more chances to write about what is relevant to them is "an active learning technique" (Chickering and Gamson, 1987: 5). By keeping journals, students can record their personal or life activities. The value of personal writing or life writing has been discussed by several scholars such as Artof (1992) quoted in Tin (2000: 49):

It is a powerful tool to find our own untapped creative power, uncover our family history, learn to see the world more clearly, heal unsolved issues, understand our fears, and explore our motivation. Through personal writing, we can develop both writing skills and awareness, can develop greater awareness and interpersonal understanding, increasing the ability to relate to others.

Students find journal writing an enjoyable experience since the primary aim of keeping a journal is "to encourage students to become involved and interested in writing" (White and Arndt, 1991: 63) without concerning much about errors and time pressure (Spaventa, 2000: 168). The benefits of journal writing are highlighted in White and Arndt's (1991: 67) discussion:

This technique has been found to be an effective and productive means of arousing interest in writing, which, at the same time, develops fluency of expression. It also helps students to become aware of why they wish to communicate their ideas and to regard writing not only as a means of personal expression, but also a dialogue in written language with the reader.

Adding to the benefit that "journal writing provides students with good opportunities to improve their writing skills individually and good chances to record their thoughts and feelings" (Ngoh, 2002: 27) is Spaventa's (2000: 168) observations:

There are many rewards about keeping a journal. In addition to the informal conversation that takes place in it between you and yourself and you and your instructor: when you have finished the course, you will have a record of what you read, what you experienced and what you thought about during that time.

In persuading learners of the merits of journal writing, Lagan (2000: 14) writes:

Writing a journal will help you develop the habit of thinking on paper and show you how ideas can be discovered in the process of writing. A journal can make writing a familiar part of your life and can serve as a continuing source of ideas for papers.

Looking upon journal writing as a way to develop the habit of transcribing one's thoughts onto paper is by and large synonymous with looking upon journal writing as a way to develop accuracy on paper. Lagan (2000: 3) displays the correlation between clear thinking and accuracy by quoting his ex-teacher's words "If you don't think clearly, you won't write clearly."

It can definitely not be expected that the first pieces of journal writing by an average student are lucid and logical; however, in the long run, with the teacher's facilitation, journal writing can eventually lead to disciplined thinking and increase accuracy. Moreover, as "journal writing can show you how ideas can be discovered in the process of writing" (Lagan, 2000: 14), it observably helps remove the embarrassing situation in which students often find themselves deficient in ideas, and thus encourages fluency. In several author's perspective, journal writing is deemed to be one type of creative writing that can help students brainstorm ideas and write more

competently and accurately as Tin (2004: 6) corroborates: “Creative writing activities can change students’ perceptions not merely on writing but also on themselves and the world they live in, lower their anxiety, and develop their writing proficiency, accuracy and personalities.”

Journal writing can also bring about another benefit that classroom writing can infrequently do. While in-class writing tasks are prone to make students nervous, journal writing can diminish the distance between the students and the teacher, and augment their reciprocal trust. A supportive learning atmosphere will thereby be created along with a high learning motivation, which students more and more integrate into their formal writing (Ngoh, 2002: 27).

The question of correction in journal writing, however, remains vaguely replied to. It is dispiriting if the teacher acts towards the students’ writing as a source of errors to be rectified. On the contrary, how can the students know what aspect of language they should improve without error diagnosis and remedial feedback? This issue is handled through White and Arndt’s (1991: 172) recommendation:

Because writers have to achieve a high degree of autonomy and self-sufficiency, it is very important to promote ways of self-correcting from an early stage .... Inevitably, we teachers will want to draw attention to language items which seem to be important to us as readers. Several points should be kept in mind when we do so:

- Concentrate on language errors which have global rather than local effects. This means attending to formal language errors which interfere with meaning over a broader span than the individual clause or sentence.
- Do not attempt to cover too many repairs. It is quite impossible for learners to cope with too many problems simultaneously.

### 3. Research methodology

#### *Participants*

85 second-year students (from among a population of 253 second-year students), 53 females and 32 males, from the two classes of practically the same writing proficiency level (predicated on the students’ scores from the pretest), who were attending the third course of writing (writing 3) at the Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City (USSH-HCMC) were invited to participate in the study. The average age was 20.21 years ranging from 19 to 25 years old. The reason for this selection was their extensive history of writing experience. Freshmen’s too brief history of writing experience will probably limit in-depth exploration. Moreover, freshmen’s writing reluctance due to their struggle in dealing with English vocabulary and grammar patterns can be misconstrued as their poor writing skill.

One second-year class (09C) was treated as the experimental group (EG), and the other (09F) as the control group (CG). The students in the experimental group were immersed in writing journal entries outside the classroom in addition to in-class writing activities and take-home written assignments, which were the mere tasks the students in the control group were required to accomplish.

#### *Instrumentation and procedure*

Pretest and posttest in the form of essay writing were employed as instruments to measure students’ writing proficiency level in terms of fluency and accuracy. Accuracy is the ability to avoid error in performance, possibly reflecting higher levels of control in the language. And fluency “concerns the learner’s capacity to produce language in real time without undue pausing or hesitation. It is likely to rely upon more lexicalized modes of communication as the pressures of real time speech production are met only by avoiding excessive rule-based computation.” (Skehan, 1996: 22).

The initial writing proficiency level of the whole population of second-year students was investigated by the pretest, from which scores contributed to the choice of the experimental group and control group of virtually similar writing competence level.

Each student in the experimental group needed to possess two notebooks with her or his name on for journal writing. They were encouraged to write journal entries as much and as regularly as they could in those notebooks during the thirteen weeks between the pretest and posttest. The reason for each student’s possession of two notebooks was that when they submitted their journal entries recorded in one notebook to the researcher, they could keep on writing in the other while waiting for the researcher to read their previous entries and give feedback. The researcher also kept a journal, whose purpose was to record any change in writing fluency and accuracy as well as writing motivation made by the students during the course of research.

Upon the arrival of the fifteenth week, the students in both experimental group and control group took the post-test, which sought to assess the impact of journal writing on the quality of the students’ in-class and

take-home writing tasks; nonetheless, merely the students in the experimental group participated in the questionnaire survey (see Table 4) collecting their reflections upon journal writing.

#### 4. Findings and discussion

##### *Impact of journal writing practice on learners' writing fluency*

Since fluency tends to hinge on more lexicalized modes of communication (Skehan, 1996: 22), writing fluency in this research was measured through the writing speed (the number of words produced within a limited length of time) and the degree of task completion.

As displayed in Table 1, the average number of words generated by the students in the control group for their 45-minute pretest was 197.20, and that generated by the students in the experimental group was 196.71. Thus, the difference in the average number of words generated by the students between the experimental group and the control group was -0.49 words, which implies that prior to their involvement in journal writing, the writing speed of the students in both groups was virtually analogous.

Nonetheless, the results from the posttest conducted after the students' thirteen-week practice of journal writing indicated a marked disparity in the average number of words produced by the students between the two groups. The difference in the average number of words written by the students in the experimental group between the posttest and the pretest was 7.90 words (4.01%) whereas that in the control group between the posttest and the pretest was 18.84 words (9.58%), implying that the writing pace of the students in the experimental group improved to a higher extent than those in the control group.

Similarly, the students in the experimental group demonstrated the better improvement in the extent of writing task completion than those in the control group. The disparity in the number of unfinished writing pieces submitted by the students in the experimental group between the posttest and the pretest was -4.0 words (-40%) while that in the control group between the posttest and the pretest was -8.0 words (-66.67%).

##### *Impact of journal writing practice on learners' writing accuracy*

Table 2 showed that the average number of errors left in the pretest papers by the students in the control group was 22.56 and that by the students in the experimental group was 23.02. Therefore, the gap in the average number of errors left by the students between the two groups was 0.46 errors, denoting that at the departure of journal writing practice, the writing accuracy level of the students did not substantially differ.

The thirteen-week practice of journal writing, however, brought about a discernible divergence in the average number of mistakes made by the students between the two groups. The average number of mistakes made by the students in the experimental group fell by 14.88 mistakes (64.64%) in the posttest compared with the pretest, whereas that in the control group dropped by 6.70 mistakes (29.70%) in the posttest compared with the pretest, which implies that the students in the experimental group demonstrated the better progress in the level of writing accuracy than those in the control group.

##### *Impact of journal writing practice on learners' writing scores*

The data from Table 3 substantiate that an insignificant disparity (-0.24) was found between the experimental group and the control group in terms of average pretest score. The average pretest score achieved by the students in the experimental group was 6.04 points and that by the students in the control group was 6.28 points.

Nevertheless, the average posttest scores earned by the students in both groups significantly diverged. The average posttest score gained by the students in the experimental group increased by 1.49 points (24.67%) compared to the average pretest score, while that in the control group increased merely by 0.46 points (7.32%) compared to the average pretest score.

##### *Impact of journal writing practice on learners' writing motivation*

As shown in Table 4, journal writing practice generated the EG students' preference towards this activity as well as their awareness of its worth in their writing learning through 33 positive responses (75%) to question 1 and 33 positive responses (75%) to question 2.

A high response rate as regards journal writing regularity in the EG students was encountered through the data that 14 out of 44 students (31.82%) in the experimental group claimed to have spent roughly an hour writing journal entries daily, and 21 out of 44 students (47.73%) claimed to have spent more or less half an hour writing journal entries per day. However, a majority of the EG students (70.45%) still sustained the habit of generating ideas in their mother tongue, then translate them into the target language.

Interestingly, the intrinsic motivation in journal writing was found to have been built in the EG students since 34 out of 44 the students in the experimental group contended to persist in journal writing activity after this writing course.

*Impact of journal writing practice on learners' achievement and motivation recorded through observations and interviews*

The change in the EG students' achievement and writing motivation was also recorded via observations of their journal entries and occasional interviews. Observations revealed that it took the EG students more or less three weeks to get accustomed to journal writing activity. Initially most of them produced short sentences in simple language to expose their feelings or to reflect on certain events of their day. A few students even left blanks or used Vietnamese to fill in the vocabulary gaps in their schemata. One student began her journal writing activity with the subsequent lines:

I've never written journal before. I am not sure that I can write journal well and regular, but Mr. Tuan encouraged me write for improve my writing skill and he will correct my mistakes. I'll try my best and I hope he will do what he said to us. (P.T.K. – Class 09C) (The erroneous parts were underlined by the researcher.)

Resonating this feeling at the departure of journal writing journey, another student wrote:

In the past, I used to write diary in Vietnamese. Now Teacher Tuan asked us write journal in English. I think it is difficult because I think I don't have enough vocabularies as well as grammar to diễn đạt (i.e. express) my ideas by English. However, I will give it a try because it sounds useful to my studies. I hope Mr. Tuan will keep my journal secret as he promised. (T.T.H. – Class 09C)

With the passing of days, the EG students grew more and more confident with their writings becoming longer and longer though errors still scattered in their journal entries. They, nonetheless, viewed errors as something they could learn and benefit from.

By the seventh week, a cooperative learning atmosphere pervaded the experimental group. Often overheard in the conversations at break time or after class were such utterances as “*Have you written your journal entry today?*” and “*What did you write about?*” The atmosphere was so cooperative that when the researcher suggested voluntary peer editing outside the classroom, a number of students positively responded by forming informal groups for this activity. Furthermore, Class 09C blog as well as individual blogs were constructed, and several journal entries were published.

Not only was the cooperative learning atmosphere among the students created thanks to journal writing, but the student-teacher rapport was also strengthened through the researcher's comments on and responses to their writings. Reflecting on journal writing, one student wrote:

I didn't know what was journal writing before, but now I know what is it. Journal writing is very, very and very interesting and useful to me because I can write anything I like in my notebooks. The teacher helps me to correct my mistakes. (T.D.U.V. – Class 09C)

To explore whether the EG participants had a prolonged interest in the activities, and if they needed any more help from the researcher, the interviews with EG subjects were occasionally conducted. The subsequent lines are a typical recording of an interview between the researcher and a student in the experimental group (on November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2009).

Researcher: Do you like writing journals in English?

Student: Yes, very much.

Researcher: Why?

Student: Because I can learn and remember many vocabularies.

Researcher: What else?

Student: And review grammar, and especially improve my writing skill.

Researcher: Do you think that your classmates like writing journals, too?

Student: Yes, I think they also like because many of them submit their journals for you at weekends.

Researcher: Do you encounter any difficulties in writing journals in English?

Student: Yes, many, such as words, structures, sometimes I can't express my ideas and feeling in English satisfactory.

Researcher: Do you need any help?

Students: Yes, but you have helped me to correct my mistakes a lot. And I think I will try more to overcome my difficulties.

Researcher: How often do you write your journal entries?

Student: About three to five times a week.

Researcher: How much time do you spend writing a journal each time?

Student: It depends! Sometimes fifteen minutes, sometimes an hour.

Researcher: Why don't you spend more time writing journal entries?

Students: I have to study other subjects.

Researcher: Thank you very much for your answers.

Student: You're welcome. I hope that you will help us correct more mistakes. Good bye, Sir.

Researcher: Sure. Good bye.

Few students, however, were not interested in journal writing and shared with the researcher their true feelings as in the subsequent interview (recorded on November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009):

Researcher: Do you like writing journals in English?

Students: Sorry. Not really.

Researcher: Why?

Student: I like to practise speaking English with my roommate and listen music more than writing journal.

Researcher: Do you think that your classmates like writing journals?

Student: I'm not sure.

Researcher: How often do you write your journal entries?

Student: Not often. Once a week when I have special something to write.

Researcher: How much time do you spend each time?

Student: About ten or fifteen minutes each time.

Researcher: I believe that journal writing can help you a lot. You should give it a try.

Student: (Smile) Thank you.

Researcher: Thank you very much for your answers.

Student: Not at all.

Researcher: Good bye.

Student: Good bye, teacher.

The researcher read and kept a strict profile of each participant's progress in terms of accuracy, fluency, and the length of their entries. Once a week, the researcher collected new journal entries from the students and returned the previous entries accompanied by elaborate and encouraging comments and advice. Toward the end of the research, the students' journal entries increased in length and the number of interesting ideas, but decreased in the number of errors. This is one of the journal entries submitted at the end of the course:

I have finished four subjects of the semester this week. I don't have to go to school often now, but I have to study more and more at home for my final exams. I hope that I will pass all of my exams and get high marks this semester. I want to get hoc bổng (i.e. scholarship). I know it isn't much, but it is a meaningful award for me, and my family will be very happy if I can get it. I love and miss my parents so much. They have to work hard to provide money for me. I am looking forward to the day I will graduate from this university. At that time, I will go to work and earn money to help my parents. If I can get hoc bổng (i.e. scholarship) this semester, I will buy a meaningful present for my mother on her birthday.

This morning teacher Tuan asked us that we like writing journals or not and we will continue to write journals after finishing this course. In fact, I didn't like to write journals at first because it took me much time and I found it is difficult. But day by day I get used to it and feel like writing journals. I can learn a lot from Mr. Tuan though

he doesn't teach me writing. My writing teacher has corrected only three essays for me during the semester, but teacher Tuan corrects my journal entries every week. I can recognize that my English is much better now. Therefore, I will continue to write journals after finishing this course and may be in the future. If I had written journals many years before, my English would have been very good now. I wonder if he will continue to help us correct the mistakes in my journals. I hope he will, and I will also ask my writing teacher to help me. Thank you very much for what he has done for us. (N.T.T. – Class 09C)

The positive change in intrinsic writing motivation is also encountered in a student' final journal entry that follows:

Writing journals by English is really useful for me to improve my writing skill. I regret don't writing diary by English since I started to learn English. Why didn't teachers ask me to do so earlier? I think you know that I like writing journals or not. I don't think you should ask us, "Do you like writing journals?" You can see that many of us always submit our diaries to you and wait to receive back our previous entries from you to see that we still make many mistakes and how you give your comments. Some of your comments are very interesting and encouraging. Of course I will write journals again in the future, but will you continue to correct mistakes for me? I know that you are doing a research, but I very appreciate your enthusiasm and kindness. You help us a lot so far, Sir. I often spend about thirty or forty-five minutes to write my journal each night. How much time do you spend to read and give comments for our journals? If every teacher does like you, students will study better. Success to you, Teacher. (T.D.K. – Class)

### Conclusion

This research investigated the benefits of journal writing as an extensive activity to nurture learners' writing motivation and boost their writing skill as well as to establish a close rapport between teachers and learners. Through reading and responding to learners' journal entries, teachers are able to measure each learner's competence and understand their needs, thoughts, and feelings, which helps teachers accommodate their teaching ways to learners' preferences and give learners appropriate assistance to their problems along the writing course.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics for writing fluency

Groups	Items	Tests		Changes	
		Pretest	Posttest	Value	Percentage
CG	Average number of words per essay	197.20	205.10	7.90	4.01%
	Number of unfinished pieces	10.0	6.0	-4.0	-40.00%
	Number of submitted essays	41	41		
EG	Average number of words per essay	196.71	215.55	18.84	9.58%
	Number of unfinished pieces	12.0	4.0	-8.0	-66.67%
	Number of submitted essays	44	44		
Differences between EG and CG	Average number of words per essay	-0.49	10.45	10.94	5.57%
	Number of unfinished pieces	2.0	-2.0	-4.0	-26.67%

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for writing accuracy

Groups	Items	Tests		Changes	
		Pretest	Posttest	Value	Percentage
CG	Average number of mistakes per essay	22.56	15.86	-6.70	-29.70%
	Number of submitted essays	41	41		
EG	Average number of mistakes per essay	23.02	8.14	-14.88	-64.64%
	Number of submitted essays	44	44		
Difference between EG and CG	Average number of mistakes per essay	0.46	-7.72	-8.18	-34.94%

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for writing scores

Groups	Items	Tests		Changes	
		Pretest	Posttest	Value	Percentage
CG	Average scores	6.28	6.74	0.46	7.32%
	Number of submitted essays	41	41		
EG	Average scores	6.04	7.53	1.49	24.67%
	Number of submitted essays	44	44		
Difference between EG and CG	Average scores	-0.24	0.79	1.03	17.35%

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for EG learners' writing motivation questionnaire survey

No.	Questions	Answers		
		Options	Number of students	Percentage
1	Do you like writing journals?	Yes	33	75.00%
		No	11	25.00%
2	Do you find journal writing useful to you?	Yes	33	75.00%
		No	11	25.00%
3	How much time do you spend writing journal entries everyday?	Approximately an hour	14	31.82%
		Approximately half an hour	21	47.73%
		Less than 25 minutes	9	20.45%
4	When writing journal entries or doing any other English learning activities, do you often think	in Vietnamese first and then translate into English?	31	70.45%
		in English directly?	13	29.55%
5	Will you keep on writing journals in the future?	Yes	34	77.27%
		No	10	22.73%