

# Extensive Writing Activity through Journaling: Students' voices

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**Abstract**—Journal writing has long been used for various purposes in educational settings due to the many benefits it offers. Despite the numerous studies on the advantages of journal writing, little is documented about how this activity is viewed from students' perspective. This study, therefore, explored how students' view a one-semester long journaling activity that they did as out-of-class assignments. The participants were EFL students of a university in Indonesia. The findings derived from students' written reflection and interview indicated that students perceived journaling a useful activity to help them improve their writing skills, build their writing habit and boost their confidence to write. They also reported that journaling served as a means to foster self-expression and promote students-teacher interaction. The study suggests that there are more benefits beyond writing improvement that can be gained from journaling and recommends that EFL teachers incorporate it in any writing instruction.

**Keywords**—journaling; feedback; extensive writing

## I. INTRODUCTION

Just like extensive reading, extensive writing is doing a large amount of free writing on a various topic in a range of styles. This can be done by having students write journals outside of class hours. Journal writing has been practiced in various contexts and proven to have many benefits especially in improving students' writing performance. For example, journal writing can increase students' writing ability [1,2]. In particular, research show that it can improve students' fluency, vocabulary as well as grammar [3-5].

Since practice makes perfect, it does make sense that extensive writing through journaling can improve students' fluency and vocabulary. As also shown in the study of Holmes and Moulton, where most students responded the ease with which they could write in English and their decreasing dependency on dictionary [6]. It is surprising, however, that journal writing as practiced in the study of Hashemi and American can improve students' grammar despite the lack of feedback on grammatical accuracy [5]. In any journal writing activity, teachers are encouraged to comment on the content of the students' entries, not the form, and in this study, there is even no feedback/response from the teacher. The students simply write weekly journal for the whole semester at the end it shows that their grammatical accuracy improves significantly. This is possibly due to the fact the students are mature enough (university students) who have been taught

grammar before and thus are able to apply their grammar knowledge in their writing. This may also be caused by the external drive (points given to the journals they submit) which makes them try to write as well as they can.

In addition to improving students' writing ability, journal writing also affects literature learning, as proven in the study of Wong, Kuperis, Jamieson, Keller, and Cull-Hewitt and Colleen [7,8]. In their studies, students are asked to write in response to literary works and it is found that students can understand the story better by responding to it. Students can then get accustomed to not only writing but also connecting the literature they read to the real life, which means promoting their critical thinking skills.

Journal writing with feedback, which is known as dialogue journal, can also provide psychological advantages, such as increasing motivation, self-efficacy, reducing anxiety and build a good rapport between teacher and students [9-13]. This is particularly true for silent students who find it difficult to express themselves orally. They can have time to formulate ideas more easily than speaking in real time. Journal writing provides them opportunity to confidently express their thought in writing, which can in turn increase their motivation to participate more in learning. The non-correction nature of journal writing also helps reduce students' anxiety and fear of making mistakes in writing.

Journal writing can help build a good rapport between teacher and students. In Tuan's study, students respond that journal writing has strengthened the bond between students and teacher due to the teacher's engagement in reading and commenting on journal entries [9]. Close rapport will eventually bring comfortable atmosphere which is crucial to successful learning.

Another benefit is that journal writing can accommodate students' varying ability. This is possible because students can write anytime about anything as much as they want and get the teacher's response which provide students with the opportunity to write at their own level. This is also supported by Herrero's study which found that teachers can keep track of their students' individual progress throughout the semester because the feedback is tailored to students' need [14]. Students' entries are authentic samples of students work from which teachers can pinpoint the content and linguistic problems and give appropriate feedback to each.

Journal writing can also develop learners' autonomy [15-17]. Through journal writing, the students become increasingly aware of themselves and their learning context and this can lead them to become autonomous learners who can take control of their own learning.

The afore-mentioned research has indicated that journal writing is advantageous not only for improving the linguistic aspects of the students (vocabulary, fluency, accuracy, grammar, etc.) but also the nonlinguistic aspects such as motivation, attitude, efficacy, learning autonomy. It is also a useful tool for teachers to know their students better as well as to reflect on their own teaching.

Despite the advantages of journaling, the students' perspectives on this activity is not widely explored. This study, therefore, will try to look at the benefits of journal writing as perceived by the students. The result is expected to provide insight on whether students view this as a useful activity and how it can be better incorporated in language learning.

**II. METHOD**

This study was conducted to uncover the students' perception regarding the implementation of journal writing as an extensive writing activity. The participants of the study were 23 students of English Major of a university in East Java. They were having journal writing as an out-of-class assignment of their Writing Subject for one semester. The journal entries were written twice a week, and each entry was provided with meaning-focused feedback by the teacher. In this feedback, the teacher only commented on the message/meaning conveyed by the students, rather than on the language aspects.

The data were collected from their written reflection at the end of the journaling period as well as interview with some of the students. A written reflection was given to students in order for them to write what they feel about journal writing.

The interview was conducted to some students to dig their voice regarding their views on the benefits and drawbacks of journal writing as well as their opinion about better implementation of journal writing.

The data from their reflection and interview was analyzed qualitatively by categorizing them into some themes as they emerged.

**III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Drawing on the result of the analysis of the students' written reflection and the interview, some themes emerged as follows:

*A. The Benefits of Journal Writing*

The students expressed relatively similar views regarding the benefits of journal writing, that can be displayed in table 1.

**TABLE I. THE BENEFITS OF JOURNAL WRITING**

<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Journal excerpts</b>	<b>Interview excerpts</b>
Improve Writing Skill	" I think journaling can improve my skill" " After writing journals for one semester I can write better"	"I am sure journaling improve my writing skill a bit, especially increase my vocabulary because if I don't know the word in English I will look up in my dictionary and when I used in my writing I remember it better".
Build Writing habit	"Twice I week I wrote on any topic, and even after the task of journaling has ended, I still continue writing" " Regular writing practice by writing journal makes me have a new habit: writing".	"I have been writing diary since I was in junior high. So this assignment is like continuing my writing habit, but this time not in my diary but in my journal to be read by the teacher".
Boost Confidence	" I think my confidence to write increase". "I used to think that I cannot write well, but after lots of practice, I enjoy writing and I am not too afraid of making mistakes in my writing".	Yes, I think journaling makes me confident to write and express my idea
Means for Self-Expression	"The best part that I like from journaling is because I can express what I feel and share my problem and get the response from my teacher".	"I am not an articulate person so writing journals help me express myself which I cannot do well orally".
Promote student-teacher interaction	"I feel happy when I read my teacher's response...I feel like I have somebody to talk to". "In my journal I can communicate with my teacher, a real communication, and that makes me feel closer to my teacher".	Teacher's response is good because then I know that my voice is heard

*B. The Drawbacks of Journal Writing*

Despite the benefits, there are also some drawbacks as expressed by the students.

1) *Time consuming*: Two journal excerpts below support this view: "Journal writing is good but it takes much time". "It requires commitment to write regularly and sometimes I have no time for it because I have many tasks".

In an interview, one student replied that she often spends much time in thinking about what to write in her journal.

2) *Lack of topics*: Other problem is lack of topic, as expressed in the following excerpts: "The problem that I face when writing a journal is I don't know what to write". "It is not easy to write anything if the teacher doesn't give me the topic. Sometimes I just have no idea at all".

3) *Boredom*: Doing the same task twice a week may cause boredom to the students, as expressed by one student in her journal entry. "I get bored because I have to do it twice a week. Usually when I am bored I will write only some sentences in my journal".

### C. How Journal Writing Can Be Better Implemented

Based on the response from their journal and the result of interview, some aspects related to the incorporation of journal writing can be elaborated below:

1) *Time*: Some students expressed their concerns that journal writing should be incorporated in all writing classes so they can continually improve their writing through extensive practice outside of class hour. One student said, "It should not be conducted for one semester only, but for all writing classes so we can continue this good practice."

A small number of students said that they dislike journal writing because it is time consuming and they do not really like to write about their feelings to others. So they recommended that the task should be given not twice a week but once in one/two weeks. This way, they could also focus on other assignments.

2) *Topic*: Most of students like to write freely about the topic of their choice, this way, they do not feel restricted by the teacher because they can write about the topic that they know more. Some students, however, wrote that they prefer being given prompts/topics to write than asked to choose their own topic because sometimes they are confused about what to write in their journal. Prompted journal writing will help prevent them from writer's block, as said by one student.

"If the teacher provides prompts, students will not be confused about what to write. I often spend a lot of time thinking of a topic and that ends up with unclear writing."

3) *Mode*: A few students still prefer paper and pencil journaling even though most prefer using electronic media (either by email, WhatsApp, social media, and others). They have no objection regarding the mode of journaling (printed, handwritten, or electronic) because each has its own benefits and drawbacks.

4) *Feedback*: When asked what to be commented, whether the message or the language, surprisingly most responded that they need both. Only few students who answered the language only/message only feedback. Those who prefer language feedback claim that journal writing can only be useful if the teacher provides feedback on the mistakes they made in their writing so they can learn from it. Those who prefer message feedback, on the other hand argue that they do not want to worry about the mistakes they made in their writing, so language feedback is not necessary.

Overall, this study indicates that students have positive attitude to journaling activity. The students claim that journaling helps foster their writing habit, and this is in line with Hull who found that journal writing can promote writing habit and Langan who claims that it helps develop the habit of thinking on paper [18,19]. This study, however, hasn't

answered the question whether the students keep their habit of writing journals when the assignment is over. Unless the students really feel the need and love for writing, there is a tendency that they will quit their journals and only get back to it when required. When responding to questionnaire and interview, most respondents expressed their desire that they would continue writing journal even though it was no longer assigned of them [2,9,20,21]. Unfortunately, there has not been any follow-up study yet to investigate whether they really continue writing or not.

Journaling is perceived to improve their confidence, and this conforms with the result of studies by Abdulmanafi-Rokni & Seifi and Thevasigomoney and Yununs that it can reduce students' anxiety in writing [10,13]. This may be due to the non-evaluative nature of the feedback (meaning rather than form). However, there are still some students who expect to be given feedback on language errors they made so as to help them learn from their mistakes., which is in line with the result of a study by Holmes and Moulton [6], in which a particular student insisted that the teacher corrected his spelling or grammar errors because he believed that correction was the key to improving his English. The students also consider that journaling helps bridge the communication between teacher and students [22], build teacher-students rapport [9]. The meaning-focused feedback make students feel 'heard' and this sense of audience help them develop their voice. Regarding the way of implementing it, involving students in reading and providing the feedback is also voiced by some students. This practice has actually been conducted by Widiati who employed *buddy journals* and this has proven to improve students' writing ability, especially in the aspects of organization, content, and language use [23].

## IV. CONCLUSION

This study suggests that majority of students have positive views on journaling, believing that it can give some benefits such as improving writing skill, building good rapport with the teacher, expressing their feeling/ideas, etc.

The result implies that journal writing can be incorporated in writing courses as an extensive writing activity. The non-threatening nature of journal writing is expected to be able to boost their confidence and motivation to write, which will in turn bring significant improvement in their writing ability. The way it is incorporated in the class can vary, depending on the condition, but they can negotiate with the students regarding the preferred time, topic, mode and feedback.

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