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A Case Study OF Reflective Journals IN A University-Level EFL Writing Course IN Hungary

MOST TEACHERS WOULD AGREE THAT TEACHING ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS TO A class of multilevel EFL learners is not easy. However, this was the situation in which I found myself at the beginning of the school year at the university where I was teaching in Hungary. While I consider myself an experienced teacher, I realized, after being assigned to teach writing to first-year university students, that I did not have a clue what to expect from them. The variety of educational backgrounds of the students—from dual language high school to just a few English classes per year—made it difficult to know what they had learned previously about writing. No pre-requisite writing test, which could have provided information about their learning needs and experience, had been administered to the students. Therefore, I decided to conduct a classroom-based action research project that would serve two broad purposes: to better inform my teaching and to serve the needs of my students in the most appropriate and effective manner.

A short needs analysis on the first day of classes would not be sufficient to find out who the students were and what they needed to know about academic writing. Not only was there a paucity of background information, but there was a lack of classroom contact time; our courses met only once a week for ninety minutes. I did not have enough time to talk with the students, nor to adequately deal with their concerns and questions. Thus, I chose to extend the dialogue by assigning learning logs.

Learning logs, in the form of reflective dialogue journals, were designed to be a sounding board. The main objectives for using logs, in addition to collecting insights and data on the students' learning and composing processes, included learning about their awareness of the writing process and their knowledge about academic writing techniques. By opening communication between them and me using dialogue journals, I would be better able to determine their concerns about writing and address them in the curriculum and lessons.

Reflection through journals

The teacher

Reflective teaching requires that teachers recognize micro-level classroom problems and try to solve them with appropriate teaching practices. Such teaching also requires being aware of cultural considerations and personal values (Zeichner and Liston 1996). Having an awareness of theoretical trends in second language acquisition is obviously essential to good teaching practice, but it is only through critical reflection that a teacher can really effect change in her particular classroom.

The journal

There have been many studies on reflection through journal writing (e.g., Peyton and Staton 1996, 1993; Peyton 1990; Peyton and Reed 1990). Teachers and researchers alike have discovered myriad benefits of journals. Mlynarczyk's (1998) account of reflective journals in the community college ESL writing class demonstrates the positive effects journals had on her students' achievement; Hudelson (1989) emphasizes the socio-affective benefits journal writing can bring to emergent writers; and Shuy (1993) and Peyton (1993) maintain that dialogue journals promote communication between teacher and student and ultimately assist students in becoming better writers.

Method and participants

The primary source of data for this project came from the learning logs collected during the first semester of the school year. Secondary data came from in-class journals written by the students in the second semester, as well as a needs analysis, a questionnaire, and the students' actual writing assignments. I included in the study only those 16 students who were enrolled in my classes both semesters. That way, I would be able to consider all forms of data produced by each student.

The writing class is a requirement for all first-year students pursuing a degree in applied (English) linguistics at the university where I taught. The students ranged in age from 18 to 24 and all were native speakers of Hungarian.

The study

I assigned a weekly journal, or 'learning log,' and required that the students make weekly entries. There were no topics; rather, I instructed them to address concerns about their writing, the class readings, the curriculum, the class lectures, and anything else related to academic writing. I told the students that the log would be informal, journal type writing, and they would not be graded on mechanics or accuracy. To receive full credit for each log, they had to fill a minimum of half an A4 size sheet with their writing. The logs were collected, responded to, and graded monthly. This weekly log requirement was carried out for a full semester.

On the first day of class, I conducted an open-ended needs assessment and had the students fill out a questionnaire dealing with their attitudes about and their prior instruction in English and writing (for both English and Hungarian). The questionnaire was developed as a way to collect further information from the students on topics commonly addressed in the original learning logs. Due to the heavy curricular requirements of the second semester (including two research papers), I chose to assign in-class journals on an intermittent basis.

Results and discussion

In the following section I analyze the students' responses in their learning logs, including their most important concerns, and I discuss their responses to the questionnaire, which addressed the concerns they spoke about in their logs.

Insights gained from the learning logs

I analyzed the 16 learning logs to find out what issues and concerns were most important to the majority of students and what their attitudes were toward keeping a journal. Their greatest concerns had to do with learning how to write reflectively; writing on assigned topics; having their classmates give them feedback during in-class peer review sessions; being informed of the grading criteria; and having to speak aloud in class, either as a presenter of their writing or in non-extemporaneous debate.

I noticed that the students used the learning logs for different purposes. The most common included complaining, clarifying, asking questions, and telling personal anecdotes. Some students were so unaccustomed to, or adverse to, this type of teacher-student communication that they simply summarized what occurred in the lesson or in the readings for that particular day. Whenever I felt it was necessary and appropriate, I addressed their concerns either in writing in dialogue journal or orally in class.

Learning how to write

Learning how to write was a concern addressed in the learning log by almost half of the students. Some of their specific concerns included insufficient explicit instruction in writing (both in Hungarian and in English), having a different voice in the two languages because the style of writing was different, and the usefulness of the process approach to writing. One student wrote this about her experience writing in English:

- I'm aware of the importance of writing. Unfortunately my former teachers did not give too much stress to writing, so it's time for me to learn how to express myself correctly in the written language. Sometimes I feel embarrassed when I realize that I understand an English book or film but I would not be able to create those sentences on my own.

Pondering her views about language learning and writing, one student reflected:

- I formed a general opinion about learning and speaking a language. Somehow it came to my mind that learning, and especially using a language which is not one's first language, is about...acting or playing a role. I think this because I have noticed that other people use a totally different voice in English, and a different style when writing, than in Hungarian…I'm doing it too, but I don't know...when I'm writing in English, my style becomes a bit stilted or unnatural…because I can't decide how to express what I want to say.

When asked in the questionnaire if the students felt that their voice was different in their second language, some students indicated that it was harder to write in English due to lack of vocabulary and because English was "more formal." One student said that she couldn't decide if her voice was different when writing in English because she had never been required to write in Hungarian.

Holliday (1994) supports the argument that non-native speakers of English struggle with accepting the conventions of English writing, although he claims that this argument is too often over generalized within the realm of culture. He accepts that non-native writers have this problem, but finds it also present with native English-speaking writers.

Ivanic and Simpson (1992) concede that finding ones' own voice is always harder in writing than in speaking because written language is so standardized. They claim that finding one's voice is "a question of making choices…within academic writing…which are most in harmony with a sense of ourselves" (1992:142).

With regard to learning the process approach to writing, students were divided. Some indicated that they were glad to learn about it because it made their task of composing much simpler. Some found it interesting. In an entry early in the semester, one student wrote:

- If you asked people how to write an article or composition, I think in most cases the answer would be: "Just sit down and write, but watch out for the grammar you use." Unfortunately, it is not that simple. Our first serious writing task is the school-leaving exam at the age of 18, which is quite late…Nobody spoke about the process which could have made our tasks easier.

Other students, however, felt that discussing the process approach in class was senseless. One student was herself divided on this issue. She said that learning about the writing process was interesting, but felt that there was no need to go through the process.

A number of authors and researchers have argued that the process approach neglects some issues relevant to writing in a second language. According to Reid (1984), the process approach does not consider variation among individuals, specifically, in linguistic and cognitive development and in academic discourse styles. Zamel (1983) criticizes the process approach in the cases in which meaning is neglected. She rejects the idea that process can be taught in a systematic way, but concedes that the teaching of writing can be done more effectively when teachers are aware of their students' composing processes. Campbell (1998) maintains that while writers experience a process that includes planning, gathering information, drafting, revising, and editing, this process is not sequential, but recursive. She likens the process approach to writing to playing pinball because writers must continually change and strategize their writing plan. Using the journals certainly allowed me to understand more clearly my students' strategies.

Having to keep a learning log

Another high-frequency concern was having to keep a journal to reflect on one's learning. Many students indicated that they had never kept a journal for a class before. In the first journal entry of the year, a student reflects on having to write a weekly journal:

- It is with great trepidation that I start this journal. It's a bit like writing to Santa Claus (forgive the metaphor) because after posting the letter you're waiting for some feedback.

She goes on to explain that while she did understand what she was expected to do in the assignment, she wanted to know if she was on the right track. Naturally, I responded that she was.

A benefit of writing the logs was seen in one student's comment. She confided that she had become much more confident with her writing overall as a result of having to write the weekly logs. She explained that having to write regularly made doing the formal classroom assignments easier.

Because so many students commented on whether the journal was a positive or negative experience, I elicited further insights about this in the questionnaire. Of the students who answered the questionnaire, only two indicated that they had written a journal for class before. When asked how they felt about having to do them, the students were divided. Some thought it was a boring assignment and some thought it wasn't useful. Several students indicated that they didn't like the assignment, but did it because they had to. However, some students who weren't fond of having to write the logs conceded that it helped them to remember what went on in class, collect their thoughts, communicate with the teacher, and ask questions.

Topics

Having a choice, specifically, choosing the topics to write about, came up in the students' learning logs. Silva (1997:361) believes that it is both "reasonable and motivating" to allow students to choose their own topics and that when students are allowed this freedom, their work is more successful. Hudelson (1989) found that the quality of writing was better when students were allowed to make decisions about their topics. Ivanic and Simpson (1992:146) describe the teacher, or "assignment setter," as one who holds the power and control and is a threat to the student. By allowing students to set their own assignments, the threat is reduced.

Of the five major writing assignments required during the academic year, students had some choice in all of them. The curriculum dictated that the students complete descriptive, narrative, and argumentative essays in the first term, and empirical and theoretical research papers in the second. Only the topic of the first assignment, the descriptive essay, was limited in scope; students were asked to write about a place. The specifics about that place were left for them to choose. The criterion for the second assignment, the narrative essay, was that it should come from the student's personal experience. The topics were open for the remaining assignments.

Almost all of the students broached the subject of topics. With regard to the first essay topic, most comments indicated that this assignment was acceptable and gave the writers sufficient freedom. Most descriptive essays dealt with the student's home or village (in Hungary or in one of the Hungarian communities in Slovakia or Romania) or with a place they had been on holiday. The topic for the narrative essay seemed to be harder for them to choose. Comparing the narrative essay with the other essays, one student wrote:

- Describing a place with nice adjectives, mostly if the place means a lot to us, or bringing up arguments in an argumentative essay seems to be easier than writing a narrative essay…finding an entertaining story is hard…These days I am walking around with eyes wide open and trying to find a story which is appropriate.

The students certainly brought their personal experience into play when writing their narrative essays. There was a broad range of topics, including a rock concert in Vienna, Boy Scout camp, and studying in Wales.

Some of the students wrote in their journals that the argumentative essay would be the hardest. The topics included globalization, Hungary's need to join the EU, and shopping malls. Since these topics were to be debated in class, the students worked in pairs; one covered the pro side of the argument in his or her essay and the other dealt with the con. In fact, one student who chose the con side of the argument confided that her attitude actually changed after writing her essay. Other students admitted in their journals to being persuaded by their peers' moving arguments in their oral debates. Overall, it appeared that using the journals helped the students develop topics for writing.

Peer review

Certain aspects of communicative and cooperative teaching were rather foreign to the group. Peer editing, or peer review, was something that struck most students as unusual. While peer review is a technique often used in cooperative classrooms, many of the students had never done it before. Many teacher-centered classes do not incorporate this type of collaboration, because the teacher is reluctant to relinquish control, which is necessary for peer review. Some students welcomed the opportunity with comments such as the following:

- I am sure it will do us good if we discuss the mistakes and try to help each other do our best.
- (My partner) gave me useful advice…When I read through my essay I hadn't noticed that mistake…I never knew peer-editing could be so important and effective.
- I think peer evaluation is a useful thing to do. It's very effective to learn from other student's mistakes.

Of course, several students brought up typical criticisms of peer review:

- I do not know whether it's useful or not… because how could I correct somebody's essay if I'm nearly on the same level as he/she is.
- I don't understand the point…I think if someone wants to be a good peer-reader, he or she has to know how to write perfectly. But if someone knows how to write perfectly, he or she doesn't need a peer reader.

After reading these comments, I always tried to address the students' concerns either in class or in a written response to the individual. In class, we discussed how and why peer editing could be useful. In their written entries, one benefit cited by students was that peer reading could help writers understand how others approach writing. Others claimed that it helped them see things they had not themselves seen. Finally, many students commented that it helped them with revising. It was clear this was quite an important topic, probably because the majority of the students had never experienced peer review in their classes before.

Knowing the Grading Criteria

As a teacher who promotes student-centered learning, I believe in telling my students the criteria by which they will be judged. However, I found that this was not generally common practice in higher education in Hungary. As a result, the majority of my students mentioned this in their logs. In fact, all who commented on this indicated that they were pleased to know how they would be graded. Several students remarked that this was the first time they had ever been told how their work would be graded.

- I have never had the grading scale and the criteria in my hand and it gives me the feeling of comfort to know what they expect of me.
- Knowing about the grading criteria is really beneficial for us. This way we know what we should and should not do to get a good mark…
- We could learn how teachers mark the students' essays, which I had always been curious about. I never thought this could be such a complex and hard task. My teachers at the primary or even secondary school

did not tell us why our essays were good or bad, they just gave us a mark. I believe it was not fair.

Speaking Aloud

Several students brought up the issue of having to speak aloud in class. The majority of my writing students had gone to traditional schools, which emphasize oral proficiency, so I assumed that most had done a fair amount of speaking aloud in their classes. This was not so.

Since a traditional debate was part of the first semester's syllabus, the students addressed this type of public speaking in their learning logs. Those who had been schooled in either the U.K. or the U.S. were comfortable and even excited about debating, but the others were nervous and somewhat frightened. Some students remarked that they had stage fright and didn't like public speaking, while several others remarked that they were afraid of having to speak in their second language. I was curious about an analogy drawn by two of the students. They likened debating to quarreling and had problems conducting an oral debate with someone that they had no personal problems with over an issue they felt was unnecessary to discuss in public.

Uses of the learning logs

The students used their learning logs for many different purposes. Some wrote to clarify concepts or to ensure they understood what I wanted with regard to an assignment. "Is that what you want?" was asked in some entries. A few students chose to use the learning log to file complaints about a lesson or assignment. Their complaints and criticisms were often in the form of opinions, for example:

- I hate to do presentations and I don't like talking in front of people.
- I didn't like the idea of having to write a descriptive essay for a place. I think it's a very uninteresting topic.

Some writers chose to be less subtle in their complaints:

- I got really disappointed…I was sure I wrote quite a good descriptive essay, and what do I get? A 3! That gave me an unpleasant taste!

Questions also occurred in the entries. General questions, ranging from personal questions about me, to questions about the course content, to specific grammar issues were raised. Normally these questions were so specific that I addressed them directly to that person in my written response.

In some entries students told stories and anecdotes. Many of the personal stories related to their experiences studying. I learned about students' homelands, favorite bands, and personal problems. One student even told me of her earliest memories of language learning (about a forest nymph character from an English program for Hungarian children).

Finally, some students used their logs only to summarize what was discussed in class or in the assigned readings in the class text. Although I was disappointed, I realized that at least the log helped them to recall what was learned and discussed in the lessons. Those who chose to merely summarize usually did so in a more formal style than those who wrote on personal topics. Perhaps these students benefited from producing a greater quantity of academic writing.

Conclusion

Overall, the use of learning logs was a way to get to know my students and their writing needs. It was also a way they could participate in the learning and teaching process by letting me know their concerns and questions. I found that as the semester went by, reticent students were telling personal anecdotes, asking for clarification, and sharing their opinions and insights. It was obvious that as the student writers became more comfortable with the logs, writing became easier for them.

The students learned that they could make positive changes in their learning by using the logs to focus and reflect on their personal writing processes and work out problems and stumbling blocks on their own. In some entries the students were actually writing to themselves in the form of a diary. Although these were dialogue journals done with the teacher, it was apparent that I was not being addressed; instead the journal was used for personal reflection.

The students' journal writing exceeded my expectations. I got responses to all the questions I wanted answered, learned their feelings about writing, and gained insights about their attitudes and abilities.

The learning had limitations, however. Many students, especially at the beginning,

wrote what they thought I wanted to hear. They concentrated on positive issues and were less inclined to criticize. This was a problem at the beginning of the year, but it decreased as students became more familiar with the format of the written dialogue and with me.

An insightful statement on teaching and learning made in 1967 by Corder (cited by Zamel 1983:169) still holds true: "We will never be able to improve our ability to help our students until we learn more about how and what they learn." One very effective way to do this is through reflective dialogue journals.

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