

Journal Writing and its Benefits in an Upper Intermediate EFL Class

La escritura por medio de diarios y sus beneficios en una clase de nivel intermedio alto

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This action research was conducted at Universidad Nacional de Colombia with nine preservice teachers of the Philology and Languages, with Emphasis in English, at the Upper- Intermediate level of English. The study consisted of planning and evaluating a pedagogical intervention, which consisted of students exploring readings and/or their background knowledge and reflecting through journal entries about themes of their own choice. The instruments to collect information comprised the students' journals, field notes from a poster session and a questionnaire. The results allowed me to conclude that the students had the opportunity to exercise a degree of autonomy which involved free choice on the topics they explored. The journal became a language-learning tool for the students; likewise, throughout its development, they experienced the need to do some research in the area they were exploring, which allowed them to construct knowledge.

Key words: Journal writing in English language learning, action research

Esta investigación acción se realizó en la Universidad Nacional de Colombia, con nueve estudiantes del programa de Filología e Idiomas con énfasis en inglés, que cursaban el nivel intermedio alto de inglés. El estudio consistió en planear, implementar y evaluar una intervención pedagógica, la cual consistió en que los estudiantes exploraran lecturas y/o su bagaje cultural por medio de reflexiones escritas en un diario sobre temas de su propio interés. Los instrumentos utilizados para recoger información de los estudiantes incluían sus diarios, notas de campo en una sesión de cartelera hechas por los estudiantes y un cuestionario. Los resultados me permitieron concluir que a través de los diarios, ellos tuvieron la oportunidad de ejercitar un aspecto de la autonomía que involucra la libre elección de los temas que exploraron. El diario se convirtió en una herramienta para el aprendizaje de la lengua. De igual forma, pudieron investigar sobre los temas que exploraban, lo que les permitió expandir su conocimiento

Palabras claves: Escritura de diario en el aprendizaje del inglés, investigación acción

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Introduction

As EFL teachers, we sometimes focus our attention in class only on teaching the language. This approach to teaching rarely gives us the opportunity to get to know who our students are and how their lives and views of the world are shaped through the interplay of several factors and conditions, including family patterns, educational histories, personal character traits, national and regional affiliations, social class background and social encounters (Danielewicz, 2001). Following this line of thought, I conducted action research project that would bridge the gap between teaching the language, learning about my students as individuals and also helping them in their learning process.

Journal writing can take different forms and respond to different purposes and the one narrated in this article presents the implementation of journal writing within the English as a foreign language class, as a way to not only support their learning process but also to enter the students' worlds as individuals.

I will start by describing the research problem, the setting and the participants; then, I present various definitions of journals, the research design and the instructional design. Next, I include the analysis of the data and, finally, put forward the conclusions and implications of the study.

Statement of the Problem

The upper-intermediate English class was experiencing the plateau effect; that is, they felt as though they were stuck in their learning process and were not able to move forward to an advanced level. In order to

help solve this problematic situation in the class, we agreed to undertake a class project in which the students engaged in journal writing and so enhance their learning process. The purpose of the task was to support this process and through it, work out a way to help students surpass that feeling of not advancing.

In view of what has been said, the study is grounded on the following questions:

- What happens to students' language learning process when journal writing is incorporated into an upper-intermediate EFL class?
- How do students react to the journal-writing experience?
- What do journals tell me about my students' view of the world?

Research Setting and Participants

This project was carried out at Universidad Nacional, a state university, with preservice students of the Philology and Languages, with emphasis in English, teacher training program. Nine students of Basic English IV (Upper-intermediate level) students participated in the project, three female and six male. This was the entire class. In order to guarantee anonymity, the participants' names were changed as follows:

- Three female students: Sara, Ana, Maria
- Six male students: Pedro, Martin, Charlie, Juan, Diego, Ricardo

Theoretical Framework

Below, I present an account of my own teaching experience with journals; then, I

include several definitions about the nature and usefulness of journals and finally, I present a brief state-of-the-art summary about the use of journals in different studies.

Incorporating journal writing in the EFL class agrees with a critical-literacy approach to teaching in the sense that we should: “Empower learners by providing them with a critical analytical framework to help them reflect on their own language experience and practices of others in the institutions of which they are part and in the wider society within which they live” (Clark & Ivanic, 1997, p. 213, cited in Pennycook, 2003). In doing so, students develop critical language awareness.

Likewise, Critical Pedagogy offers language-teaching educators multiple possibilities to vary the linguistic approach to teaching and learning English. Steiner et al. (2000) pinpoint a learning principle from Freire’s work which reads: “The world must be approached as an object to be understood and known by the efforts of learners themselves. Moreover their acts of knowing are to be stimulated and grounded in their own being, experiences, needs, circumstances, and destinies” (p. 65). In that line of thought, learning should go beyond the specific contents of an area, which was guaranteed by the free choice in topic selection in the teaching-learning experience that this article reports on.

Concerning my experience with journals, back in 2001 I first came across the book *Strategies for Success* (Brown, 2002), which encouraged me to start incorporating journals in my EFL classes. In his book, Brown persuades EFL students to write journals by telling them that they are very

informal diaries about their own feelings and thoughts as they are studying English. He also asserts that it is easy to write a journal and that it will help the students to be better learners. The idea of giving students a tool to write about their learning process was very appealing to me and I started to implement it right away in 2002. I have continued to implement journals in my EFL classes ever since, every time with various purposes. The present experience depicts an innovative practice in the EFL classroom which features the journal as a means for improving the writing skill and a place for self-exploration and reflection for the students.

This action research project builds on evidence suggesting that responding to reading in writing, sharing ideas and reflecting on our own ways of knowing are processes that enhance learning and improve thinking (Wilcox, 1998). Students record their personal responses and reflections in their journals. A journal is a place where our thinking can become visible, we toss around ideas and consider what others think; we make connections between new and prior information, examine our own thinking strategies, and judge our own learning (ibid, 1998). Wilcox also presents a taxonomy of journals according to content and language of thinking; journal keepers’ contents include interpretations, reactions, questions, and comments; and through them, they illustrate, express, describe, select, justify, deduce, suppose and sort.

In order to continue developing this concept, it is necessary to highlight the great variety of purposes that educators can give to journals in their classes. In that

respect, Fulwiler (1991) emphasizes that EFL students can write about academic problems and progress to sorting out where they are, how they are doing, and perhaps discuss what to do next.

Another quite relevant feature of journals is its free-writing nature. As such, they can be used for diverse purposes such as class starters and as a vehicle for posing and solving problems; to summarize important aspects of a lecture or lesson; to monitor students' progress in the class; and to give students the opportunity to write to each other about concerns and questions raised in the class, among others purposes. More importantly, journals are also places where students can try out their expressive voices freely without fear of evaluation. This is a key aspect in the present action research project since I encouraged students to write on a regular basis without being coerced by a grade that measured technical aspects of the language such as syntax, grammar, punctuation, and the like. Instead, I evaluated the process as a whole and students received the highest grade for having completed the task.

Genesse & Upshur (1999) present a number of benefits of journals. First, they provide useful information for individualizing instruction; for example: writing skills, writing strategies, and making use of students' experiences in and outside of school; learning processes; and tapping into students' attitudes and feelings about themselves, their teachers, their school and interests, expectations and goals. Second, journals increase opportunities for functional communication between students and teachers. Third, they give students opportunities to use language for

genuine communication and personalized reading. Fourth, they permit teachers to individualize language teaching by modeling writing in their responses to student journals. Fifth, they promote the development of certain writing skills and sixth, they enhance student involvement in, and ownership of learning. All of the above represent benefits that are pertinent to this action research project.

Genesse & Upshur (1999) also recognize the uniqueness of journals as a means for collecting data, as they are a method of collecting information that is extensively under the control of students since they can write whatever and however they want.

In the Colombian context, Viáfara (2005) conducted a study with student teachers in which he designed tasks within a reflective framework to support student teachers' learning in their practicum. One of the reflective tools that he used was journals, which, he said, "traditionally have been widely used in teacher education courses to provide participants with an opportunity to engage in one of the most successful manners of reflection: dialoguing with oneself or someone else" (p.61). The student teachers not only shared their journals with the researcher but also among themselves; thus creating a group dialogue for peers to react by answering or posing questions, providing suggestions, narrating experiences, agreeing and disagreeing and so forth. As part of his observations about the main gains of using journals, Viáfara states that journal writing not only facilitates student teachers' reflections, but also informs the supervisor about issues that arise from the practicum, in order to

arrange meetings to address their needs and expectations.

A second study, conducted by Quintero & Guerrero (2005) used journals with eighth- semester students in order to provide a space for reflection on critical pedagogy. The focus of the study was to investigate the student teachers' discursive actions as they were reflected in their journal entries. They observed how the student teachers' individual discursive actions evolved as they reflected on critical pedagogy tenets and aspects that are crucial to their lives as professionals, such as reflecting, being critical and sensitive to their human and social dimension and that of their pupils.

In a third study conducted with eighth-semester student teachers, Castellanos (2005a) used student teachers' journals as a source of data to inform her study about the way they construct their own image as teachers. The reflections of the journals contained rich information about the student-teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning, their philosophies as teachers, how they engaged in collaborative work with their teachers, supervisors and peers, among other significant aspects.

Finally, Castellanos (2005b) conducted a small-scale project with first-semester preservice students of a teacher education program in ELT at Universidad Distrital during the first semester, 2004. In her study, the author explored the role of journals as a rich source of information for assessment, which is understood as nonmeasurement (qualitative) techniques that provide information useful for instructional planning (Genesse & Upshur, 1999). Two related questions guided this

small-scale project: How can students' feedback inform my decision-making in ongoing instructional planning? What kinds of assessment information do students' journals provide? The findings concentrate on assessment information provided in students' journals by analyzing their weekly entries. The results suggest that valuing instructional activities, identifying strengths and weaknesses in language skills and experiences with language learning outside of school are the most frequent type of assessment information that constitutes rich first-hand information for a teacher's decision-making in ongoing instructional planning.

In this theoretical framework, I included different views pertaining to the nature and usefulness of journals. Next, there is a description of the research design, the instructional design and the presentation of the data analysis.

Research Methodology

The action research design provided a step-by-step methodology to plan, implement and evaluate the pedagogical intervention. According to Carr & Kemmis (1986), as cited in Burns (1999), "action research is a form of self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out" (p.30). I considered action research to be the most accessible form of research, for it allowed me to propose a

solution to the problem that I encountered in this class.

I followed the four “essential moments” of planning, action, observation and reflection (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, as cited in Burns, 1999). After observing the class for the first two weeks and an informal talk with the students, I planned my pedagogical intervention which was the task of journal writing. Along with the implementation of the action, I gathered data which I analyzed in order to reflect on the implemented action. The reflections that arose from these moments are presented later in this article in the discussion of the findings.

The Instruments Applied with the Students to Collect Information

I used the following instruments:

1. Students’ journals. I collected the students’ journals every week and read and analyzed them in order to find evidence of the students’ language-learning process and their views of the world. The students wrote their last journal entry using the following prompts, which were essential to learn about their reactions towards the journal-writing experience:
 - Why did you choose the topic you explored in your journal?
 - How did you feel during the process?
 - Can you name any pedagogical implications of journal writing?
2. Field notes from the poster session. My notes gathered students’

opinions about the advantages and drawbacks they experienced in the process of journal writing.

3. A questionnaire. The questionnaire contained eight questions which were answered by all of the students. The questionnaire that I designed informed me about the students’ opinions, feelings and ideas as regards the journal-writing experience. The questions were used for eliciting information pertinent to the task of journal writing, whether it was successful or not, and for evaluating the most relevant aspects of this experience. I administered the questionnaire to all the students once they had completed nine journal entries (See Appendix 1).

The Instructional Design

In class, the students discussed their needs during the first week of the semester, addressing the most – and least-explored aspects of language they had been exposed to during their learning process. Among the most-explored, they mentioned grammar, reading and vocabulary; writing was the least-explored. Later on, an informal talk with the students shed light on their interest in carrying out a class project. They agreed on writing entries in a journal outside the class, where they could explore a theme of their choice.

Initially, the task was expected to be carried out over ten weeks, from August 19 to October 31, 2003, and students were expected to write a weekly entry, for a total of ten entries. In the end, however, students were able to present only nine

entries instead of the ten that were originally intended due to activities and events on campus that reduced the number of classes. I responded to every entry by posing questions, providing suggestions, interpretations and my point of view, agreeing and disagreeing and so forth. A certain level of informality and flexibility was guaranteed since students needed to perceive their journal as their site for self-expression.

The complete process of journal writing was shared in a poster session during a class at the end of the semester, during which I had the opportunity to learn their opinions about the advantages and drawbacks they experienced in the process of journal writing. The themes that the students explored were the following:

- Three students, two female and one male, explored mass media and news.
- Two male students explored aesthetic topics such as modern art and music.
- Two male students explored worldwide issues: globalization, the global village and third-world chaos.

- One female student focused on dubbing (providing the dialogue of movies and TV programs in the language of the viewer country).
- One male student's journal topic was his hometown.

Findings

Data analysis consisted of examining the data carefully to search for salient patterns, and emerging commonalities were used to construct the final categories. Data extracts from the students' journals reveal the participant's perspective. The extracts of the participants have not been modified or grammatically corrected in order to ensure authenticity.

The patterns, themes and commonalities that emerged from the analysis of the questionnaire, the journal entries and the notes that I took during the poster session were condensed into the following categories:

Questions	Categories
What happens to students' language- learning process when journal writing is incorporated in an upper- intermediate EFL class? How do students react to the journal- writing experience?	1. Journal writing, an integral language- learning tool 2. I reflect, therefore I am 3. Flowing dialogue or discouraging criticism 4. Valuing the pedagogical implications of journal writing
What do journals tell me about students' views of the world?	5. Read my word, read my world

Table 1. Categories drawn from the data analysis.

1. *Journal Writing, an Integral Language-Learning Tool*

This category answers the first two questions, namely, what happens to students' language-learning processes when journal writing is incorporated into an upper-intermediate EFL class? How do students react to the journal-writing experience? It describes the students' opinion of the journal as a tool for language learning. The aspects that are mentioned here make journal writing a very integral task that involves many aspects of language learning other than the mechanics of the language because language is conceived as permeating every experience of the human being. Some of these aspects include the journal as a means for exploration and research of topics that are grounded in the students' interests. Another is free choice, since the students had the opportunity to exercise a degree of autonomy in their free choice of the topics they explored. Likewise, the journal is regarded as a way to observe and experience process writing.

The students highlighted their enjoyment of the process of researching in order to inform themselves about the topic. According to their answers, the students experienced the need to do some research, look for information that they had retrieved from different sources such as articles in newspapers, magazines and the Internet; and to create bibliography and discography. Throughout the journal entry process, students learnt about the themes they explored which included music, art and poetry, reacting to these forms of art by means of reflections and productions of

their own. Below I include a poem written by one of the students in his journal:

It is not about peace or violence
Peace will never be gained without social equality
It is not about delinquency
Delinquency is a result of social inequality
It is not about personal overcoming
It will keep and promote social inequality

It is about the power framework and the kind of society it produces
It is about looking for a new kind of society
It is about looking for a new kind of power
It is about looking for a new future full of liberty and real peace.
(Pedro)

Likewise, they experienced the journal as a means to express themselves with absolute freedom to write about something they like or know about and to say how they feel about it.

Finally, as seen in Pedro's verbatim quote: "the best thing about journal writing was to get used to writing and improve writing skills by putting into practice vocabulary and grammar in context". The journals helped in the English-learning process because it improved the writing skill. The free nature of journal entries was a key aspect to students' improvement, since they didn't feel pressured to fit their writing to rigorous formats, thus, their writing flowed. They also identified improvement in grammar, vocabulary, connecting ideas through the use of connectors and developing opinions with arguments.

I have included the students' own words that can tell us about their views on the purpose of writing in their journal in terms of improving writing skills: "Develop

written fluency through reflections and statements” (Ricardo); “Watch a process through what we were writing” (Ana); “Get used to writing” (Maria). They also think the journal is an opportunity to “talk and write about a topic we are interested in” (Juan) and “an easy way to learn English working with a topic in which you are interested” (Charlie). Students’ voices also support the view of language that is at the core of this action research: “Strength or a creation of a personality, identity” and to “discover things I didn’t know about my reason to be like I am” (Pedro).

The students’ responses to journal writing as a learning tool seems to support the purposes of journal writing that are put forward by Genesse & Upshur (1999), which consist of promoting the development of certain writing skills and enhancing students’ involvement in, and ownership of learning.

2. *I Reflect, Therefore I Am*

This category also responds to the questions: What happens to students’ language learning-process when journal writing is incorporated into an upper-intermediate EFL class? and How do students react to the journal-writing experience?

The experience of journaling as a reflective tool, as reported by the students, supports Wilcox’s (1998) views when she asserts that responding to reading in writing, sharing ideas and reflecting on our own ways of knowing are processes that enhance learning and improve thinking. The students in this action research project seem to agree on the fact that reflecting upon their chosen theme helped them construct

new knowledge. In order to illustrate this view, I have included some of the students’ *in vivo* words, such as “think more about”, “realize”, “become aware” “think about new ways”, “took me to places I didn’t know or didn’t want to go before.” Also, reflection fostered the need to take action. To exemplify this statement, one student’s journal was developed around the topic of his hometown and he wrote: “The journal helped me to think more about the issue and probably I could help a lot in the future” (Ricardo).

Two students, whose topic for reflection was news and mass media, suggest that reflection helped them to make connections: “Reflect about how the news can be related to the human behavior and to establish relations between news and the things that happen in the world” (Charlie); “Assume a position about the information I receive everyday” (Ana). For another student, reflection helped to “reaffirm some ideas I had” (Juan).

3. *Flowing Dialogue or Discouraging Criticism*

...the dream of liberating education is for equality and against hierarchy... for an egalitarian classroom and against authoritarian relations in the classroom; for dialogue among peer students and with the teacher and against the monologue of the talking teacher who lectures students into silence and boredom.
(Shor, 1986, p.5)

Establishing a dialogue with the students by writing comments on their journal entries is not an easy task. I find this part of journal writing to be the most critical one since the teacher’s comments are

extremely loaded with subjectivity and they can enhance the process or contribute to its detriment. I was especially interested in knowing whether I had affected positively or negatively the students' self-confidence as writers. Fortunately, most of the students felt "happy", "proud", "comfortable" and "motivated" by my comments. They felt the journal was a means of communication where points of view were shared, appreciated and valued as interesting and important. Peyton & Reed (1990) present journals as a wonderful opportunity to have an actual dialogue. The journal, they assert, becomes, on one hand, an alternative to classroom interactions in which the teacher asks questions for the students to answer; and on the other hand, an alternative to the teacher's response with brief, evaluative comments to students' written texts. In contrast, dialogue writers place the value in the open and mutually exchange ideas.

In the beginning of the process, the students were expecting to find comments related to the elaboration of ideas and cohesiveness. Concerning this aspect, one student wrote: "I expected comments such as you should explore X statement more or I don't get your idea; instead, I found comments that were motivating" (Ana). This particular student, however, felt that she needed to be "more criticized to be more demanding with myself". Another student wrote that through my comments he had realized he should work harder on the coherence of what he was writing.

On the other hand, I also concluded that journals become a valuable space for the students' voices. Earlier in this article, I show my concern about the little amount of time that is actually dedicated in class to

listening to what students have to say and sometimes their voices are totally left out. Students' responses in the questionnaire show that this pedagogical intervention opened a very valuable space for self-expression and freedom. Students' journals were planned, thought and rethought by the students themselves; this made the classroom a laboratory grounded in the lives of the students where they explored the ways in which their lives connect to the broader society and how they are limited by that society. Under the heading: "Multicultural education is important to all students", Nieto (2002) addresses the issue of invisibility when she argues that the primary victims of biased education are those who are invisible in the curriculum. Our students become invisible when the only voice that is heard in the classroom is the teacher's voice.

For the students who wrote about issues that affect communities and for the ones that explored issues of individual interests, the journal was the place where they became visible. Next, I include some students' voices concerning this aspect

"I really want to thank the teacher for having given us the opportunity to write all that stuff and let us say what we probably would never say in class" (Sara).

"This has been for me a beginning. I did not only learn more about that what I like, but also express many things that I had not had the chance to express" (Ricardo).

Finally, to illustrate the point of becoming visible, I quote a wonderful metaphor that introduces a student's entry: "How to prevent a drop of water or being dried? Throw it to the sea" (Pedro).

Journals, as well as other great numbers of classroom tools, can become an instrument for the inclusion and validation of all. As Nieto suggests, multicultural education is by definition inclusive because it is about all people and for all people regardless of their ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, religion, gender, race, class or any other kind of difference.

For me, taking such aspects into account was challenging, especially in the moment of responding and reacting to the students' entries because I needed to be aware of the danger that engaging in a conversation with the students through their journals may imply. Therefore, I was especially careful not to bias my comments; for instance, acknowledging only what I thought was true or generally true, not making punitive comments, or using irony to disagree. I had to be particularly careful with loaded words that are judgmental or with labels on the students' thoughts and reflections. Likewise, it was very tempting to include comments that disapproved of students' vocabulary or style and to include comments criticizing form rather than focusing on what they intended to communicate. Fortunately, students' answers did not point out any of the above; however, they felt that sometimes I was a careless reader or did not pay enough attention to what they had written.

4. Valuing the Pedagogical Implications of Journal Writing

This category adds responses to the questions: What happens to students' language- learning process when journal writing is incorporated into an upper-intermediate EFL class? and How do

students react to the journal-writing experience?

On the one hand, the last question in the questionnaire aimed at retrieving information about whether or not they would recommend the use of journals, to which they all replied affirmatively. The responses given in the last entry of their journal concerning the pedagogical implications are also explored here. Among the reasons they gave for their answers were the following:

Journals are a free way to express what you feel or know about something you have not talked anywhere (Sara).

You can get others' opinions and learn from everybody (Ana).

Is a way to know the students and that they show interest in this kind of activities (Juan).

Is a positive thing, everybody has the right to express freely (Pedro).

You can improve your English and express yourself (Sara).

Is very innovative and gives more solutions to learning than drawbacks (Diego).

Is a nice useful way to learn and improve English and a good reflecting exercise (Ricardo).

Journals should be checked weekly and we could include technology; for instance, use e-mails to check the journals and send comments (Charlie).

On the other hand, the students' last journal entry also helped me see the impact of the journal-writing task. It informed me about why they chose their topics and how they felt during the process. Some of the commonalties in their responses show that they chose to write about something that puzzled them, thus, they wanted to

understand and about which they wanted possibly find some answers. Of course, interest in the topic was also a major factor.

One student's entry reads:

"Afterwards I started looking for solutions and today I am still looking for them. But it doesn't mean that I haven't succeeded, it means that every day I learn new things and realize about the problems..."

(Last journal entry, Sara)

Another student wrote:

"I wanted to talk about it because I think it is a current topic and everybody should know about it."

(Last journal entry, Charlie)

These students' voices show an interest in topics that affect everybody as a community as opposed to the other half of the students who wanted to explore themes of a more individual nature. For instance, one male student wanted to explore drugs and alcohol in rock music lyrics because, as he says in his own words:

"I wanted to make clear, for those who could read this, some things about the strange world of drugs, their rocker soundtracks, why the lyrics, why some of them aren't simple apologies or invitations to take drugs, as most people think".

(Last journal entry, Martín)

This quote suggests that he had sensed a biased point of view about the interpretation of these lyrics and wanted to show a different one.

I also wanted to provoke responses about journal writing as a pedagogical tool, to which the students pointed out advantages and disadvantages. In the poster session, they orally expressed that among the advantages were building

new knowledge through researching, comprised of both written and oral sources (e.g. interviews), reading and reflecting. Moreover, other advantages include developing writing skills by writing about real things, about something they like, enjoy or believe; the realization of issues that they had not been aware of before; and assuming a position before the issues they explored.

Some disadvantages that they experienced in their process included, on the one hand, the need to receive more formal instruction in writing. In that respect, two students manifested that they would have liked to receive feedback about their style, grammar, syntax and the like. On the other hand, two of them experienced difficulty at the beginning of the process because they did not know what to write about. Moreover, a couple of students experienced blockage and difficulty in putting their ideas on the paper; one of them honestly remarks on the lack of discipline to write weekly. Others highlight that time constraints did not allow them to get deeper into their entries. Finally, one of them found it really hard to talk about something without being subjective and he confessed that he was afraid of being misunderstood.

5. Read my Word, Read my World

The final category "read my word, read my world" sheds light on the question: What do journals tell me about students' views of the world? I asked students about what someone could learn about them through their journal and they suggested that people may learn about their identity as writers and thinkers. Concerning this

aspect, they said: “Something about me and the place where I live” (Ricardo); “They may get a little piece of reflection” (Ana); “I can show an image as a thinking person who makes his own decisions” (Martin); “How I think about the topic and how I put down my ideas in words” (Juan); “The way I see society, the world and our real situation in political, social and economic terms” (Pedro). Despite these positive comments, other students’ answers can be interpreted as having a pessimistic view of the relation between a writer and a reader; for example, one perceives that nowadays “nobody cares about someone else’s point of view” (Diego).

Although all students were engaged in the same task, they focused their journals on a variety of things. For example, Sara experienced writing as a way to value the job of people involved in dubbing, which she portrayed as unknown but important; Ana saw writing in a journal as a place she could approve or disapprove of human actions and Pedro viewed writing as an important tool to learn about and refine his political self. I now present some students’ discourses.

Sara: Valuing the tasks of people involved in dubbing

Sara developed a very expository and explanatory discourse, polite and technical because of the vocabulary that she uses, as if displaying a lot of knowledge about the topic. However, even though her discourse is expository and explanatory, the terms she uses are not excluding the reader. She informed herself about the task of dubbing and presented it first by describing it and

then in a historical perspective. This type of discourse helped her learn more about the topic, and it also helps the reader get a glimpse of what dubbing is. She also explained why she was interested in dubbing and presented dubbing as a task she would like to undertake. Even though she relates this task to her identity as an English apprentice, it is not highly valued and therefore is not closely related to herself:

“It seems weird that translator and adapter’s part is in some way relegated in importance for me, since their work has to do directly with language itself and I love languages and my own language (because language says pretty much about culture and society at the time that about individuality); for that I affirm that I also have a high regard for that part of dubbing work...”

However, she also views other tasks involved in dubbing as something completely apart that require the construction of a totally different self; throughout her journal she highly regards the task of voice actors. However, she sees it as something distant, a thing apart from her that she would like to work with one day:

“I must be honest, definitely I would like to be a voice actress; all those glorifications I have made of Dubbing about are the unquestionable proof. Certainly, all the tasks involved in this work are very interesting and even praiseworthy, but I do love actor’s task over all the things and I admire them. I can recognize the voice of many of the actors; I like each of their particularities; and I would like to acquire those skills of creativity and beauty that they reflect in their voices”.

There are also traits of identifying herself to dubbing through her identity as a Colombian-by feeling proud that Colombia has a great reputation and goodwill in dubbing: “Nowadays, it has reestablished a little the level of performance that the actors must have in order to be genuine actors, and I am proud to say that they are some excellent voices able to compete with the ‘monster’ of Mexico”. However, she is very critical of the role of Colombia in dubbing and she explores solutions that would make Colombia an authority and leader in dubbing.

Ana: Approving and disapproving human actions

Ana’s discourse is reflective and critical of the “actions” of people portrayed in the news. She draws from news that is available and accessible. In this sense, her entries begin with introductory sentences such as “I heard (e.g. in the news)” or “I saw”. She is selective of news that causes a reaction by contrasting and comparing it to her own system of beliefs. She writes: “I love work in this journal because I learn a lot about myself, about the people, about how news can touch you, interest you, produce feelings like anger, happiness, incapacity.” Her identity is then built around what’s right or wrong to her. However, there is no evidence in the journal of what supports her system of beliefs and her criticism of some human actions. It is difficult to identify whether she displays a primary discourse or a secondary discourse. Primary discourses are learnt within the home and family and secondary discourses are learnt from being apprenticed to many groups

and institutions (Gee, 1990, as cited by McCarthy, 2002). As a writer, she does not elaborate her ideas in depth; instead, her reflections have the characteristics of an oral discourse, process-orientated, lexically sparse but grammatically intricate (Halliday, 1985, as cited by Baynham, 1995).

Pedro: Refining his political self

Pedro viewed writing as an important tool to learn about and refine his political self. He writes: “This exercise has been one of the best ones in the class and I know that it helped, has helped and will help my linguistic, personal and political development”. His discourse is very academic and persuasive. He draws from various voices he has encountered, “When looking at the world I see... All of the above is part of another process: my political formation; which have been motivated by several factors such as personal experience, moral and ethical formation, family, music, literature (an arts in general), some teachers, some friends and lots of lectures and books that have been providentially put in my hands”. From his quote, we can see how his discourse has been shaped and developed in continuous and constant interaction with others (Bakhtin, 1981, as cited by McCarthy, 2002). He builds his identity as a political being by aligning himself to the ideas of Latin American leaders who have struggled for justice and equality: “I certainly think that in all times there will be certain people that dream of a united and free ‘Afrolatinoamerica’ with enough room for Indigenous, Blacks, Whites and mix blooded people”. He reaffirms himself in the diversity that characterizes Latin America

and rejects the political world leaders who encourage globalization.

In this analysis, I have presented the salient points in connection to the questions, the main aspects of the data retrieved from the three different instruments that I used to evaluate the pedagogical intervention, and examined students' views on their own journal-writing process. Finally, I have presented a brief account on the discourses of three students' journals with the purpose of identifying how they view the world. Let us now turn to a discussion of the findings that I have presented and relate them to the language-education field in our particular context.

Conclusions

The evaluation of the journal-writing task permitted me to conclude that journal writing allows students' free choice. They had the opportunity to exercise a degree of autonomy which involved exercising free choice in selecting the topics they explored. Journal writing implies exploration and research of a topic; throughout the development of the journal, students experienced the need to do some research in the area they were exploring. Besides expository, explanatory and descriptive discourse, students developed a reflective tone towards the topics explored. The journal was a site of dialogue and students viewed it as a means of communication between them and teachers. Unlike essays, which aim at looking at writing as a product, students experienced the journal as a way to observe process writing, and, at the same time, as a tool for learning English

in context. Finally, the journal constituted a rich resource to identify traits of identity construction.

The accounts of the discourses of three students revealed that all of them construct identity based on what interests them; they reproduce primary and secondary discourses (Gee, 1990, as cited by McCarthy, 2002), products of their home, schooling, institutions and other people. He suggests that language is more than a set of rules for communication, it is an "identity kit" that signals membership in particular groups and that discourses include "ways of being in the world, or forms of life that integrate words, acts, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes". This analysis also confirms that identity builds from the interaction of many voices that people encounter.

Pedagogical Implications

The implementation of the task of journal writing has had an impact at the level of an EFL class of a language-teaching program in a public university in Bogotá, Colombia. I hope that the information included here can and will serve as an inspiring experience for other language teachers who constantly assume the challenge of adjusting and integrating new teaching practices to meet the needs of learners.

Some of the implications of this action research include that our decision-making in the class, pertaining to planning, should be informed by students' real needs, not only in terms of linguistic knowledge, but also in terms of their visibility. We can not ignore

or discard students' individualities with a totalitarian approach to teaching that forces us to see our students as a homogeneous corpus that needs to be shaped. Journal writing, as it was experienced and reported on this action research, can become a place for visibility; that is, to hear our students' voices, to engage in a dialogue with them as an alternative to the classical classroom interaction characterized by the teacher's questions and the students' answers to those questions.

Likewise, other pedagogical implications of this experience are related to the transformations that were observed and accounted for by the students themselves in their attitudes and perceptions towards writing. They became informed about the different aspects to be taken into account in order to promote writing. From my point of view, students benefit from an approach to writing that is grounded in content rather than form. Additionally, teachers need to be respectful and open-minded about the students' thoughts, ideas and feelings towards the topics they pursue. Another important implication is engaging in authentic and honest dialogue as an alternative to the monologue of the talking teacher who lectures students into silence and boredom (Shor, 1986).

To sum up, this experience was valuable for the students and for me. It was beneficial for the students because they experienced the journal as an integral language-learning tool. Also, they were free to write about the topic of their choice and to express themselves spontaneously without being coerced by the teachers' comments or the grade itself. Likewise, they had the chance to research, reflect

and learn more about their topics and themselves in the process. For me, through valuing the students and their thoughts, ideas and feelings as well as understanding education from an egalitarian point of view, my teaching practice has been enriched and sustained.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire about the Journal Writing Task

Student's Name: _____ Date: _____

Topic: Keeping a journal

Please answer the following questions in a few words or sentences.

1. What is the best thing about writing in your journal each week?
2. What do you think is (are) the purpose(s) of writing in your journal each week?

1. How has the journal helped you to reflect on _____
_____ ? (Write the topic of your journal here)
2. How has the journal helped you in your English-learning process?

1. How do you feel when you read the teacher's comments each week?
2. How do you feel when the teacher doesn't comment in your journal?
3. What could someone learn about you through this journal?
4. Would you recommend the use of journals? YES _____ NO _____ Why?