

***Using Journal Writing for Developing EFL Pre-service Teachers'  
Writing Skills and Teaching Performance***

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**ABSTRACT**

The present study aimed at identifying the effect of using journal writing on EFL pre-service teachers' writing skills and teaching performance. The subjects of the study were eighty students enrolled in the fourth year, English Department, Faculty of education, Cairo University, Fayoum Branch. They were randomly assigned to either the experimental or control group; each consisted of 40 students and were granted similar circumstances of practice. They had two "essay writing" classes per week; each was for 2 hours. The two groups attended the first class together to fulfil the requirements of the course, but they were separated for the second class. The experimental group was exposed to the program of journal writing designed by the researcher, whereas the control group was given some extra writing activities. The other tools of the study were: a writing assessment checklist which was used for the pre- and post-testing of the subjects' writing skills and a teaching performance assessment checklist which was used for the pre- and post-testing of the subjects' teaching performance. The experimental lasted for three months and a half. Results indicated that the students of the experimental group outperformed those of the control group in both writing skills and teaching performance. The study presents some recommendations for maximizing the practical use of journal writing and suggests some topics for further research.

## **Introduction**

Teaching practice, for the prospective teachers of English, represents a bridgehead between what they learn in theory at the faculties of Education and the real school life that they will soon face. The life force of teaching practice is thinking and wondering. Student teachers carry home those moments of the day that touch them and they question decisions made and opinions given. During these times of reflection, they realize when something has to be changed or modified. The value of reflection for the student-teachers is that it gives them confidence to think about what they do or learn and reason through their case so that their pedagogy is more appropriate to the situation (Carter, 1998; Loughran, 1997; Adams, 1996 and Hudson, 1995).

The research on the role of teacher education programs in producing reflective teachers would suggest a significant departure from current methods used to educate pre-service teachers for professional practice. Only a small proportion of the pre-service teacher education programs feature reflection as a key aim (Liston & Zeichner, 1991; Edmundsen, 1990 and Goodlad, 1990) and among these programs reflective teaching has remained elusive (Cochran-Smith, 1991 and Zeichner & Gore, 1990). Even aspects of the hidden curriculum of teacher education tend to impress on pre-service teachers the idea that reflective teaching is largely a technical enterprise and is not based on questioning the political and social aspects of schooling (Ginsburg & Glift, 1990; Sirotnik, 1990 and Giroux & McLaren, 1987).

Another interpretation views the apparent failure of teacher education to promote reflective teaching as less a problem of programs and institutional context and more a problem of pre-service teacher readiness. Technical and practical issues, such as how to manage a classroom and how to plan lessons, take first priority in the minds of the pre-service teachers. So, survival is the first order of business for them, not the moral and political dimensions of teaching. The work of some researchers who have examined the developmental stages beginning teachers pass through suggests that attempts to encourage reflection during the pre-service years are misguided (Kagan, 1992 and Berliner, 1988). But critics of this view ask – if not now, when? They see the urgency of raising reflection as an issue in pre-service teacher education because, given the social conditions of schooling, it is unlikely that critical dispositions will develop during in-service years (Valli, 1993). Therefore, the present study adopts journal writing for promoting EFL pre-service teacher's reflection because of its importance for their learning and teaching and since writing is regarded by

many educators as integral to thinking (Walker, 1988; Niles, 1985 and Olson, 1985).

### **The Problem of the Study:**

As a teacher trainer of prospective teachers of English, the researcher has frequently noticed that the current practice of teaching they have at the schools does not encourage them to reflect on what they do or learn. The pre-service teacher education programs at the various Faculties of Education in Egypt do not give reflection its due attention either; something which affects negatively the EFL pre-service teachers' learning as well as teaching. So, the present study is an attempt to answer the following question:

How effective can journal writing be in developing the EFL pre-service teachers' writing skills and teaching performance?

### **Significance of the Study:**

Enabling prospective teachers of English to reflect on their performance helps them identify the points of strength and weakness in what they do or learn. This identification of the positive and negative aspects is the first step towards any desired modification. Being able to describe or even inquire about what they have or what they lack helps them understand how they are limited by their mechanical relation to the objects of their lives (Pascual, 1996).

Training prospective teachers of English in journal writing in the way it is done in this study helps them use the same techniques with their students at schools; something which may help those students develop their writing skills and start thinking critically at an early age. This will certainly enable them to figure out more about themselves, their mental abilities, talents, and skills. This may urge them to adopt and create better thinking types.

### **Hypotheses of the Study:**

- 1- There is a statistically significant difference (favoring post-testing) between means of scores obtained by the subjects of the treatment group in the pre- and post- writing tests.
- 2- There is a statistically significant difference (favoring post-testing) between means of scores obtained by the subjects of the control group in the pre- and post- writing tests.

- 3- There is a statistically significant difference (favoring the treatment group) between means of scores obtained by the subjects of the treatment group and those of the control group in the post- writing test.
- 4- There is a statistically significant difference (favoring post-testing) between means of scores obtained by the subjects of the treatment group in the pre- and post- assessment of the teaching performance.
- 5- There is a statistically significant difference (favoring post-testing) between means of scores obtained by the subjects of the control group in the pre- and post- assessment of teaching performance.
- 6- There is a statistically significant difference (favoring the treatment group) between means of scores obtained by the subjects of the treatment group and those of the control group in the post testing of teaching performance.

#### **Limitations of the Study:**

This study is limited to:

- 1- Five types of journals: personal journals, simulated journals, dialogue journals, writing notebooks and learning logs.
- 2- Eighty students enrolled in the fourth year, English department, Faculty of Education, Cairo University, Fayoum branch in the academic year (1997 – 1998).
- 3- A period of three months and a half starting at the beginning of February and ending by the middle of May 1998.
- 4- Their writing skills.
- 5- Their teaching performance.

#### **Definition of Terms:**

These definitions are adopted in the present study:

**Journal writing** is defined by Fulwiler as expressive, personal writing in the first person about ideas that the writer perceives to be important. It can be broad in scope or narrow, focussing on response to one academic subject or drawing connections from the whole of the writer's frame of reference (1982, p. 17)

**Reflective teaching** is defined by Bennett as thoughtful decision-making striving to enhance personal development and academic performance of

students. This reflection is a spiral, on-going dialogical process that involves four interactive dimensions: Introspection leading to knowledge of one's assumptions, values, and beliefs about teaching; consideration of possible alternatives during the planning and interactive phase of teaching, critical analysis of the effectiveness of selected alternatives in terms of personal/ program goals and values, and confirmation or revision of beliefs about teaching and/ or best classroom practice. (1996, p. 7)

### **Review of Literature**

Considerable research has been conducted on reflective journal writing. Some studies investigated the relationship between journal writing and thinking processes and highlighted the importance of journal writing in developing thinking processes such as: recall, comparison, classification, interpretation, evaluation and others (Zacharias, 1991; Knight, 1990; Barone, 1990; Carswell, 1988; Niles, 1985 and Fulwiler, 1982). Others tried to find out the relationship between journal writing and reflection and stressed the effectiveness of journal writing as a tool for refining the process of reflection. These studies tried to gain insight into the value of journal writing for the students. They tried to figure out whether students' reflection on their established beliefs made them more amenable to possible changes in those beliefs and more open to new ideas (Carter, 1998; Pajares, 1992 and Richardson, 1990).

Some other studies tackled the relationship between journal writing and learning. These studies investigated the benefits journal writing offers to accommodate diverse learning styles and encourage learners' autonomy. They examined the effect of using journal writing on the students' reading comprehension, literature appreciation, writing quality, attitudes towards writing and obstacles to reflective writing (Kerka, 1996; Strausbaugh, 1995; El-Naggar, 1995 and Cobine, 1995).

The role of journal writing in reducing anxiety was also the focus of some studies. Sgoutas-Emch and Johnson (1998) examined the efficacy of journal writing in reducing perceived anxiety and physiological reactivity towards a statistics course required for a major in psychology. The results suggested that journal writing is an effective therapeutic tool in stress management and anxiety reduction. These results were affirmed by the studies of Andrusyszyn & Davie (1997), Adams (1996), Tichenor & Jewell (1996), Cartwright (1996), Hudson (1995), Kingen (1995), Burt (1994), Payton (1991) and Rabinor (1991).

The effect of journal writing on developing professional judgement in teaching was the main concern of some studies lately (Fernandez-Balboa,

1998; Carter, 1998; Dinkelman, 1997 and Smith & Pape, 1990). But most of these studies adopted qualitative research as an approach to obtaining descriptive information on variables not easily assessed through empirical research. This indicates the lack of empirical studies in this area and the need for further research, which the present study tried to do.

### Materials and Methods

The present study was conducted to find out the effect of using journal writing on EFL prospective teachers' writing skills and teaching performance.

#### Subjects:

Eighty students enrolled in the fourth year English Department, Faculty of Education, Cairo University, Fayoum branch in the academic year (1997 – 1998) were involved in the study. The mean age of the subjects was (20.75) at the beginning of the experiment. Repeaters were excluded. The subjects were randomly assigned to either the experimental or control group: each consisted of 40 students and was granted similar circumstances of practice. Pre-testing also revealed no significant difference between means of scores obtained by the experimental and control groups whether in writing skills or teaching performance. A summary of the data is presented in tables (1) and (2) below.

Table (1): Means of scores obtained by the subjects of the experimental and control groups in the pre-testing of writing skills

Group	Number of subjects	Mean	S. D.	t-value
Control	40	15.18	2.82	0.04
Experimental	40	15.15	2.84	

t-value is not significant at (0.01) level.

Table (2): Means of scores obtained by the subjects of the experimental and control groups in the pre-testing of teaching performance

Group	Number of subjects	Mean	S. D.	t-value
Control	40	61.25	7.22	0.05
Experimental	40	61.18	5.92	

t-value is not significant at (0.01) level.

### **The experiment:**

The study was carried out during the academic year (1997 – 1998). It lasted for three months and a half starting at the beginning of February and ending by the middle of May. Fourth year English Department students had two essay writing classes per week; each was for two hours. Both groups attended the first class together to fulfill the requirements of the course, but they were separated for the second class. The experimental group was exposed to the program of journal writing designed by the researcher, whereas the control group was given some extra writing activities.

### **Tools of Study:**

Three tools were used in the study:

#### **1- A Program for Developing Reflective Writing**

The researcher designed this program taking into consideration that the subjects of the study should be armed with a very well established theoretical background about the various types of journals since they are prospective teachers of English and may require their own students to write journals in the future. The program consists of a teacher's guidebook and a student book presenting five types of journals: personal journals, simulated journals, dialogue journals, learning logs and writing notebooks. Each is dealt with in a lesson. The lesson starts with a theoretical background about the type of journal presented in the teacher's guidebook, followed by a discussion and two models of the journal. A space for taking notes is provided in the student book. Then students are smoothly taken, through analytical and synthetic processes applied to the models, to the guided practice where they are asked to map a journal and develop it, with the help of the teacher, into a paragraph. In the free practice, students are asked to write a journal on a topic related to their teaching practice or learning then read it aloud to the class sharing their experience with their classmates. Students are given three more weeks for further practice in writing each type of journal. At the end of each lesson some exercises are presented for evaluation. The program was examined by a jury of seven members as for its general form and content and was modified according to their comments.

#### **2- A Writing Assessment checklist**

The goal of this assessment checklist was to assess the EFL pre-service teachers' writing skills. Reviewing the literature and previous studies helped the researcher in constructing it. It is a fifteen-item assessment checklist with a five-point rating Likert scale type that ranges from "excellent" to "poor".

### **3- A Teaching Performance Assessment Checklist**

The goal of this assessment checklist was to assess the EFL pre-service teachers' teaching performance. Reviewing the literature and previous studies helped the researcher in constructing it.

It is a fifty-item assessment checklist with the same five point rating scale as that of the writing assessment checklist. It has three parts: lesson planning, lesson implementation and finally personal and professional qualities.

#### **Testing and scoring:**

Numerical values were assigned to grades on a 2 –0 weighting going from "Excellent" to "poor" on both forms. An individual's score is the total of all the items. In addition to the researcher's scoring of the students' writings by means of the writing assessment checklist on a topic given to them: for pre-and post testing, he was keen to train two raters in using the checklist for pre and post testing of the pre-service teachers' writing skills and means of scores were calculated to guarantee maximum objectivity. The researcher also trained the teaching practice supervisors in using the teaching performance assessment checklist for the pre and post-testing of the pre-service teachers' teaching performance.

#### **Validity:**

The two checklists were examined by a jury of seven members as for the stating, relevance and suitability of each item. They were modified in the light of their comments.

#### **Reliability:**

A pilot testing for the two checklists were performed on 90 students enrolled in the fourth year, English Department, Faculty of Education, Cairo University, Fayoum Branch near the end of the first term in the academic year 1997/1998. The test retest method was used to calculate the reliability coefficients of the two checklists with two weeks interval. It was (0.82) for the writing assessment checklist and (0.87) for the teaching

performance assessment checklist. Therefore, they demonstrated a reasonable level of reliability.

## **Findings, Discussion and Recommendation**

### **Testing Hypothesis 1:**

A comparison of the means of scores obtained by the experimental group subjects on the pre- and post-testing of writing skills indicated a significant difference between the pre- and post- testing favoring post-testing. The mean of the experimental group in the pre-testing was (15.18) and on the post-testing was (23.7). t- value (13.42) was highly significant. The difference between the means of scores indicates the progress achieved by the subjects of the experimental group. Table (3) sums up the means of scores obtained by the subjects of the experimental group in the pre- and post-testing of writing skills, standard deviations and t-value.

Table (3): Means of scores obtained by the subjects of the experimental Group in the pre- and post- testing of writing skills, Standard deviation and t-value

Number	Pre-mean	S. D.	post-mean	S. D.	t-value
40	15.15	2.84	23.7	2.78	13.42

t-value is significant at (0.01) level.

The progress in writing skills of the experimental group showed by table (3) is due, the researcher believes, to the sufficient reflection journal writing allowed them to have on what they did or learnt. These results affirm the first hypothesis.

### **Testing Hypothesis 2:**

A comparison of the means of scores obtained by the control group subjects in the pre- and post-testing of writing skills indicated a significant difference between the pre- and post- testing favoring post-testing. The mean of the control group in the pre-testing was (15.18) and on the post-testing was (17.83). t-value (4.29) was significant. The difference between the means of scores indicates the progress achieved by the subjects of the control group. Table (4) sums up the means of scores obtained by the subjects of the control group in the pre- and post-testing of writing skills, standard deviations and t- value.

Table (4): Means of scores obtained by the subjects of the control Group in the pre- and post- testing of writing skills, Standard deviation and t-value

Number	Pre-mean	S. D.	post-mean	S. D.	t-value
40	15.18	2.82	17.83	2.64	4.29

t-value is significant at (0.01) level.

The progress in writing skills of the control group on the post testing of writing skills is due, the researcher believes, to experience and the instruction they had. These results affirm the second hypothesis.

### Testing Hypothesis 3:

A comparison of the means of scores obtained by the subjects of the experimental and control group in the post-testing of writing skills indicated a significant difference between the two groups favoring the experimental group. The mean of the experimental group was (23.7) and the mean of the control group was (17.83). t-value (9.56) was highly significant. Means and standard deviations of scores obtained by the subjects in the post-testing and t- value are presented in table (5).

Table (5): Means of scores obtained by the subjects of the experimental and control groups in the post-testing of writing skills, standard deviation and t-value

Group	Number of students	Mean	S. D.	t-value
Control	40	17.83	2.64	9.56
Experimental	40	23.7	2.78	

t-value is significant at (0.01) level.

The difference between the means of scores obtained by the experimental group and the control group indicates the contribution of the program to the writing skills of the experimental group.

### Testing Hypothesis 4:

A comparison of the means of scores obtained by the experimental group subjects on the pre- and post-testing of teaching performance indicated a significant difference between the pre- and post- testing favoring post-testing. The mean of the experimental group in the pre-testing was (61.18)

and on the post-testing was (79.45). t- value (12.73) was highly significant. The difference between the means of scores indicates the progress achieved by the subjects of the experimental group. Table (6) sums up the means of scores obtained by the subjects of the experimental group in the pre- and post-testing of teaching performance, standard deviations and t-value.

Table (6): Means of scores obtained by the subjects of the experimental Group in the pre- and post- testing of teaching performance, Standard deviation and t-value

Number	Pre-mean	S. D.	post-mean	S. D.	t- value
40	61.18	5.92	79.45	6.74	12.73

t-value is significant at (0.01) level.

The progress in teaching performance of the experimental group showed by table (6) is due, the researcher believes, to the sufficient reflection journal writing allowed them to have on what they did or learnt. These results affirm the first hypothesis.

#### Testing Hypothesis 5:

A comparison of the means of scores obtained by the control group subjects in the pre- and post-testing of teaching performance indicated a significant difference between the pre- and post- testing favoring post-testing. The mean of the control group in the pre-testing was (61.25) and on the post-testing was (66.35). t- value (3.16) was significant. The difference between the means of scores indicates the progress achieved by the subjects of the control group. Table (7) sums up the means of scores obtained by the subjects of the control group in the pre- and post-testing of teaching performance, standard deviations and t-value.

Table (7): Means of scores obtained by the subjects of the control Group in the pre- and post- testing of teaching performance, Standard deviation and t-value

Number	Pre-mean	S. D.	post-mean	S. D.	t- value
40	61.25	7.22	66.35	7.03	3.16

t-value is significant at (0.01) level.

The progress in teaching performance of the control group on the post testing of teaching performance is due, the researcher believes, to

experience and the instruction they had. These results affirm the second hypothesis.

**Testing Hypothesis 6:**

A comparison of the means of scores obtained by the subjects of the experimental and control group in the post-testing of teaching performance indicated a significant difference between the two groups favoring the experimental group. The mean of the experimental group was (79.45) and the mean of the control group was (66.35). t- value (8.40) was highly significant. Means and standard deviations of scores obtained by the subjects in the post-testing and t- value are presented in table (8).

Table (8): Means of scores obtained by the subjects of the experimental and control groups in the post-testing of teaching performance, standard deviation and t- value

Group	Number of students	Mean	S. D.	t-value
Control	40	66.35	7.03	8.40
Experimental	40	79.45	6.74	

t-value is significant at (0.01) level.

The difference between the means of scores obtained by the experimental group and the control group indicates the contribution of the program to the teaching performance of the experimental group.

**Discussion:**

The results of the study affirm the contribution of journal writing to the pre-service teachers’ writing skills and teaching performance. This contribution is undoubtedly due to the many benefits journal writing offers for adult learners. This conforms to the findings of Kerka’s study (1996) that asserted that journals document mental processes and can be used as a tool for growth through critical reflection. She also denoted that journals are less threatening and closer to natural speech. Results of Strausbaugh (1995) also affirmed that journal writing is beneficial to students and teachers allowing them to think while they write and developing a risk free environment.

The improvement in the pre-service teachers’ teaching performance indicates that sustained reflection on teaching deepened their insight and developed their decision-making skills. This was supported by the study of

Tichenor and Jewell (1996) that outlined techniques to help focus teacher observations and serve as mentors and coaches. Brubacher, Case & Reagan (1994) also pointed out that the development of pedagogical schemata can be encouraged by reflective practice that helps speed up the development of the experimental base upon which good teaching depends. One feature of the improvement in the pre-service teachers of English was maintaining rapport with students and developing relaxed and anxiety free relationships with them. This was affirmed by Hudson (1995) who denoted, in her study that journal writing in a free form leads to trusting relationships with teachers and students' increased understanding of their own needs and motives.

The contributions of journal writing to the pre-service teachers' writing skills was also confirmed by Eastman (1997) who indicated, in her study, that journals provide students with opportunities to write, allow personal connections with curriculum and teachers, document life experiences and contribute towards increased fluency and improved attitudes towards writing. Similar results were obtained by the study of Song (1997) that investigated the effect of dialogue journal writing on the writing quality, reading comprehension and writing apprehension of college freshmen studying English as a foreign language.

#### **Recommendations:**

In the light of these study findings, the following recommendations seem pertinent:

- 1- Reflection should be widely practiced especially by the EFL inservice teachers for their professional development.
- 2- Criterion-based assessment checklists should be widely used in the evaluation of student teacher performance.
- 3- Reflection should be adopted to defuse the performance anxiety some student teachers show.
- 4- Student teachers should have more training in classroom management skills.
- 5- The use of journal writing should be encouraged for developing writing skills.

#### **Suggested topics for further research:**

In the light of the study findings, the following topics seem worth attempting:

- 1- Using journal writing with secondary school students to develop reflective learning at an early stage.
- 2- Investigating the effect of reflective practice on the students' creative writing skills.
- 3- Using journal writing to develop EFL teachers' decision-making skills.
- 4- Investigating EFL teachers' attitudes towards reflective teaching.
- 5- Investigating the effect of shared reflection techniques on some aspects of EFL student teachers' performance.

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