

Adventures of a Journal Writer-Teacher: Some Reflections on Writing

Nupur Samuel

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will share my adventures as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher and my attempts to enable my first semester students of English proficiency course enrolled in various social sciences programmes in a university to become self-directed learners. I will describe how reflective writing was adopted as a tool for writing and introspection and how it can be adopted/adapted to help students become autonomous learners. Through my paper, I will trace the journey of a group of people sitting together in amicable silence in which no one reads the other's work, nor comments or censures it, and yet it gradually leads to some interesting developments. At the same time, I will also record my struggle with writing and helping others write. I will reflect on what writing means to me as a teacher-researcher-writer, and what writing does and can do when it is given some space in our literal and mental spaces.

Key words: reflective writing, autonomous learners, critical thinking, in-class writing

INTRODUCTION

This paper gives a glimpse into my world of writing. I am a journal writer who is also a teacher of writing, and who has attempted in the last few semesters to use reflective writing as a tool to develop the English language proficiency and critical thinking skills in my students. I will share some samples of writing, both mine as a teacher of writing and those of my students, to illustrate the journey I embarked upon with my students. As in most journeys, the significant role played by people who have gone before me and who walked with me will be highlighted through examples and references.

While diary writing as a tool for reflection and professional growth is neither new nor a useful technique for everyone (McDonough, 1994), it has been extensively used (Shin 2003; Irvin & Daniels, 2002). In my paper, I will share how it was used by me as a teacher as well as my students to make sense of what was happening in the classroom. It helped my students to consolidate their learning even when their reflections did not go beyond a summarization of the activities of the day, and it provided me with a platform to review each class and modify the activities for later classes. Although such mid-course corrections are usually part of a teacher's life, I would like to believe that reflection helped me do this in a more informed, sustained and organized manner. Most importantly, it got us all writing.

THE CONTEXT: WRITING AND THE WRITER

The importance of writing in our lives cannot be undermined. From text messages to emails and assignments, or for a teacher, feedback on assignments, writing takes up a lot of our time. My interest in writing grew when I started teaching and I realized that most of the assessments of student learning in almost all disciplines and across learner levels, happens through their written performance. Yet, surprisingly, very little class time is devoted to writing or to the teaching of writing. Most written assignments are given as home tasks which happen without teacher supervision or support, and feedback on such writing is mostly delayed and given in the form of grades, which is usually unhelpful (Ferris, 2006). If we do any writing in class, it is mostly as part of a test or an exam, where we write furiously in a short period of time without any thought to revising what we have written. Years of formal schooling kill our desire to express ourselves since our graded papers, covered in red ink with teacher comments, haunt us for years to come. Writing is seldom, if ever, seen as a pleasurable exercise, or as a medium for expressing ourselves in ways of our choosing. This is true as much for my fresh-out-of-school first year undergraduate students as for me, a teacher of English and of writing who has spent half a decade working on writing assessments as part of my PhD thesis.

Given this context where discussions on writing and assessment are almost taboo, it should not come as a surprise that writing remains shrouded in mystery. It is viewed either as a dreadful thing or a romantic idea, depending who you are and who your audience is and what the purpose of your writing is. To be honest, I still harbour romantic notions of writing that happens in picturesque solitude, where you have the luxury of time and space to work on your ideas and present them as beautifully as the landscape around you. Over a period of a couple of semesters, I have made various failed or ineffectual attempts at writing. I have bought lovely

handcrafted notebooks, fountain pens and dark pencils, and have alternately tried writing on paper or on my new touchscreen laptop. When these failed to help me write regularly, I signed up on Penzu, an online journal. I was hoping that an outside agency, with its daily email reminder with the nagging subject line, “How’s your day going”, would prompt me to write in my e-journal. It did make a difference; I went to bed guilt-ridden, while the pages of my e-journal and the fancy handmade paper journals remained unsullied by my thoughts. In all this, despite my abject failure to write, the desire to write did not die.

While I pondered over my strange predicament, I was influenced by an article that I came across. In this article, a teacher had shared her experience of using reflective writing in a class of students whose basic proficiency in English prevented them from writing. She devoted the first twenty minutes of class time to writing reflections which were not evaluated, effectively using journal writing as a tool of expression, confidence-building and practice in writing (Alejandro, 1981). I was also impressed with Dawson’s (2016) idea of writing as a “breathing space” (114), not just a physical and mental space, but an emotional and safe space where it is not judged harshly but where the student, as a writer is given support and encouragement to explore ideas and make connections. As a participant of a series of workshops on writing, I have experienced the encouraging benefits of a collaborative and safe space where my fellow writer-colleagues and I, after initially struggling with words, then tentatively testing our ideas, were gradually able to write. We found joy in discovering our thoughts and in our ability to write as the workshop progressed. This may seem inconsequential, but to some of us who had been grappling with writing and failing miserably, this was a great moment of triumph.

Building on this idea of writing together, encouraged by my experience of being part of the writing workshops and reading Alejandro’s research article and other instances where teachers used journal writing in class (Hume, 2008; Shin, 2003; Bailey, 1990), I decided to introduce it to my first-year undergraduate students. Most of these students struggled to read and write in English and had been recommended the basic English course so that they could cope more effectively with the demands of a university where the medium of instruction is English.

STRUGGLING WITH WRITING

Initial attempts to use reflection as a tool resulted in disaster. While journal writing initially started as a home task, I soon brought it into the class where we began each session by writing about the previous session and/or learning outside the class. The idea was to create a collaborative space, in which the members of a

group help to create a space for themselves and others by engaging in discussing, sharing and giving feedback on others' writing (Dawson 2016). I devoted the first ten minutes of a two-hour class to writing reflections. On day one, I saw the students looking at each other, perplexed and unsure. I announced that I would write too, and as I bent down to write in my journal, from the corner of my eye I saw them doing the same. I wrote this entry:

While my students write, I marvel at them—they can write—I need to give them enough opportunities. Occasionally I see them looking at me—if I don't write, they think it's time for them to stop too so I am writing these lines to give them some more time.

It did not take us many days to get used to starting our classes like this, and there were times when I would lift up my head and see them all writing quietly. I must confess it brought me much joy to see the class engaged thus and I often marvelled at what they must be writing. Moreover, it forced me to think more critically of what I had done in the previous class. However, when I read my students' reflections, it was clear that they did not know how to write a reflection. In my next class, I discussed what a reflection was and gave them some prompts such as, "What did you do in class today? Did you like it? If yes, why? If not, why not?" Surprisingly, the students only focused on the "what", bringing to class entries that only mentioned what had happened in class:

"Today is [*sic*] our Quiz so we did not study much but I learnt some difficult words and their meanings" (Piyush).

"Today's class was started [*sic*] at 9 am. The [*sic*] Nupur mam [*sic*] was coming [*sic*] and discuss [*sic*] about the three thinks [*sic*]. She was giving [*sic*] a [*sic*] home work" (Yogi).

"In last class, we learnt how to write summary by practising with [*sic*] paragraph and open discussion in the class" (Bhanu).

I once again highlighted the need to focus on "how and why", but it did not yield much result.

The journal entries that showed factual descriptions instead of reflection filled me with dread and I wondered if I should drop the whole idea. I started doubting its efficacy and questioning the utilization of time thus spent. Around this time, I got the opportunity to attend a workshop on Exploratory Action Research (EAR) to help me make sense of what I do in my classes and how I could do it better. Like the writing workshop in the summer, this proved to be more beneficial than I could have imagined, even though it was some time before the results became visible. In the EAR workshop, the emphasis was on exploring different aspects of

an issue before plunging into action research, a chance to explore the “why” and the “what” before you tried to understand the “how”. I had gone to the workshop to find out “how to help my students write better reflections”. Instead, I was asked to first explore, “Why do students think they write reflections?; What, according to students, is good reflective writing?”, before coming to the “how” question. I came back to Delhi armed with these questions and hope in my heart that something may still come out of this enterprise.

In the next class, I asked my students what according to them was the purpose of writing a reflection. They all froze for a few moments, a look of bewilderment and surprise on their faces. This was their second month in the university and most of the students had been through conventional schooling, where learning meant memorizing scripts from textbooks or teacher lectures, and reproducing them in the exams. Later, in one of our conversations, they revealed how overwhelming the university was proving to be since they were constantly asked to think for themselves and to have an opinion. It came as a huge surprise to them that they could question what their teacher did in class and wonder what good would come out of it all.

I now decided to bring reflection into their writing. I had typed some samples from their entries on a word doc, which I projected on a screen. I asked, “So, what do you think the writer is doing here?” Somebody said, “What happened in class”. “Right, good. Let’s read the next sentence.” We went on and we realized that the whole text was a description of what had happened in class. “Do you get an idea about whether this person liked any activity or learned anything?” “No”. “What can we do to change that?” This led us to adding some lines. By the end of this session, we had collectively come to an understanding of what constituted a good reflection. Implicit in this exercise was the lesson that writing is recursive; that we can add, delete and change the order of our ideas; in short, writing is work-in-progress.

SOME INTERESTING RESULTS: EXPECTED AND NOT SO EXPECTED

It was a slow process, but as time progressed my students’ writing showed attempts at reflection on various aspects of classroom activities and tasks.

“Today we have a test on past tense worksheet. After the test we exchange our answer [*sic*] with [*sic*] partner, this is actually a very good activity because other people can check your paper well and learn the answer again” (Anuj).

“Today, we worked on paragraph writing which we had already learnt in the EPC class but however [*sic*], we made some mistake that shows the

importance of practice in continuation [*sic*] i.e. if you can't [*sic*] practice regularly, you cannot be good at it" (Prabhat).

"In the last class, quiz [*sic*] is held. In which questions are related to modals [*sic*]. I also notice, we use modals in our everyday life" (Kushal).

Some students also discovered that reflection helped them in the thinking process; for example, when it was a follow-up to a movie screening.

"After the movie, we have got [*sic*] question [*sic*] on it for assignment. During writing of assignment I thought more and more about the questions. Due to thinking [*sic*], I learned many things related to real life and my thinking skill [*sic*] also improved" (Alka).

Similarly, for a writing assignment:

"I also focused on paraphrasing. Due to paraphrasing [*sic*], I learned the synonyms [*sic*] of many words. I also learned how to nurture ideas. Ideas could be nurtured [*sic*] by thinking more and more" (Isha).

These reflections ranged from writing about various activities such as tests, quizzes, essays, paragraphs or a video on presentation skills, to doing research through Jstor. The students shared how they were developing their critical thinking skills through various activities and spending time reflecting on this important aspect of learning. Ayesha, a student who had been struggling to expressing herself and barely getting qualifying grades in other subjects showed remarkable progress as the semester came to an end. She had this nugget to share:

One thing I learnt during the semester about myself or anyone else [*sic*] that if we internally connected [*sic*] whatever is being teach [*sic*] or receive [*sic*] about the course, we don't need to do [*sic*] any effort to get grades, if we are busy learning something new, we [*sic*] indirectly rewarded.

This was one of the most telling comments on this adventurous journey that we had embarked on together. It highlighted the importance of focusing on the process rather than on the product as this would yield rich results and long-term learning. As is evident, Ayesha's grammar is not perfect, but she is able to express her ideas with great clarity and conviction.

In order to explore whether the students were able to understand the usefulness of reflective writing, I also asked them to reflect on the process of reflective writing. I was pleased to note that the students were forthright in their comments. While some of them thought that it was like any other assignment which needed to be done, a few did not like writing reflections, and many of them talked about their growing interest in reflective writing. Ajay wrote:

Writing a reflection is a good idea. During writing realise [sic] it is helping me in many things. it [sic] helps me in thinking. It also helps in how to write [sic]. Reflections improve my grammar [sic] also. When I started writing reflection, I come to know many [sic] things. Before writing reflection, I cannot able [sic] to [sic] what I likes or dislikes and why? It is the best way to know many [sic] things about yourself. Firstly, [sic] I [sic] really scared to think how I write. But now I feel good because it is not a bad idea to spend time to write [sic] reflection.

Bhumi had something similar to say:

Earlier I don't [sic] know what to write because I don't understand what is happening. It is hard for me to analyse that [sic] class what I learnt. But now I think it is helpful-both internally and externally because it gives you a [sic] time to think what you are doing? Where you are going? And [sic] to analyse the whole process of your work so that you realise the importance of time and take action in the [sic] direction.

Komal liked reflective writing, but was confused with regard to its effectiveness in improving her language skills:

I think writing reflections helped me in various ways. Like it emphasises [sic] to recall that [sic] what I have learnt and what have I done in a day. It also improved my thinking skills. Sometimes I feel that through this continuous writing, my writing skill has some improvement but sometimes I don't [sic]. the [sic] best part of writing reflection is that I got to know what I did, what did I learn and what did I feel?

Reading these entries, my own anxieties and self-doubt melted away as I noted that a few stolen moments of sustained reflection was allowing students to remember what they had learnt as well as giving them practice in writing. Since their writing was not graded, they were able to produce a substantial amount of writing by focusing on their thoughts, without worrying about their grades. Moreover, they were discovering various things about themselves. I am hopeful that this will help them to become more autonomous learners.

Conclusion

While many students showed progress in their manner of thinking, approaching tasks and writing activities, this improvement in skills cannot be generalized for all students. Some students continued to simply write summaries of the texts they had read or listened to, or activities they had done, but even this seemed to consolidate their learning and give them practice in writing. One of the most noticeable results that I have seen with these students is the regularity with which

they have submitted written assignments this semester with an ability, even an eagerness to revise their drafts. Many teachers of writing would agree with me that that is a reward in itself. And the fact that many pages of my own journal are now splattered with my thoughts.

Using reflective writing is both a promising and challenging enterprise (Stanley, 1998), especially if you are working with first year undergraduate students. It is something they are not familiar with and therefore, it requires a lot of time and patience for reflection to start taking shape and yield any tangible results. In a system that thrives on quantitative data of student progress, this process may appear daunting and time-consuming. Nonetheless, the power of reflection to shape the perception of students and teachers in meaningful and long-lasting ways makes it an important tool for teaching writing and developing thinking skills.

REFERENCES

- Alejandro, A. T. (1981). Some helps for journal writing. *The English Journal*, 70(5), 48-49.
- Bailey, K. M. (1990). The use of diary studies in teacher education programs. In J. C. Richards & D. Nunan (Eds.), *Second language teacher education* (pp. 215-226). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dawson, C. M. (2016). *The teacher-writer: Creating writing groups for personal and professional growth*. Berkeley: National Writing Project.
- Hartman, W. (1994). A teacher-researcher's reflection. *The English Journal*, 83(6), 55-58. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/820265>
- Hume, A. (2008). Promoting higher levels of reflective writing in student journals. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 28(3), 247-260.
- Irvin, J. L & Daniels, D. C. (2002). What research says: Becoming a reflective practitioner. *Middle School Journal*, 33(5), 52-56. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23043587>
- McDonough, J. (1994). A teacher looks at teachers' diaries. *ELT Journal*, 48 (1), 57-65.
- Shin, S. J. (2003). The reflective L2 writer teacher. *ELT Journal*, 57 (1), 3-10.
- Stanley, C. 1998. A framework for teacher reflectivity. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(3), 584-591. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3588129>

Nupur Samuel is Assistant Professor at Centre for English Language Education, Ambedkar University. She teaches English language and is interested in teacher education and English language assessment.

nupursamuel@gmail.com