

DEVELOPING WRITING SKILLS THROUGH DIARY WRITING

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Rezumat: *Diarismul este cel mai spontan, autentic, dar și sincer dintre genurile biografice, datorită faptului că reconstituie, zi de zi, impresii despre evenimente imediate. Datorită caracterului sistematic, calendaristic al jurnalului, acesta se*

poate transforma într-o tehnică de autocunoaștere, dar și de dezvoltare pluriaspectuală.

Prezentul articol examinează posibilitatea utilizării jurnalului la orele de limba engleză, pentru a dezvolta abilitățile de scriere, precum și efectele jurnalului asupra personalității celui care practică acest gen biografic.

Key words: self-referential practice, diary, journal, diary writing, writing skills, teaching /learning process.

The 21st century is considered the century of the self-referential practices. It does not mean life writings are new coinage, but only that they have refurbished in an absolutely amazing way. The process is diverse and includes a very large amount of literary autobiographical narratives: memoirs, autobiographies, digital life stories, war memoirs, survivor narratives, etc. Nevertheless, such enduring forms as diary and confession are still very popular. It could be motivated by the fact that the diary is the most spontaneous of retrospective life narratives and it is written under the impression of the immediate events.

There are two terms used by the scholars to name a daily record of a person's life experience: *diary* and *journal*. Examining the existing definitions, we have concluded that some theorists consider these terms interchangeable, others try to trace a differentiating line, considering that a *diary* is more intimate than a *journal*, thus a journal has the tendency to become public.

This retrospective form can be used in teaching and developing writing skills, first of all because it implies regular practice, record. The student could find this exercise of writing a very effective way of self-expression. It could start as diary writing, without the aim to be presented to or checked by the teacher; however later it may become a journal keeping practice and be presented to the public. Nevertheless, the teacher may possibly reach a large variety of goals with clear benefits both for the teaching / learning process and for the student's emotional state as well, since keeping a diary does not mean only practicing good grammar and sentence structure, but it should also become a place to write down feelings, thoughts, and personal impressions about every single day. Thus, this type of recording could have therapeutic effect and, first of all, should teach the students to evaluate their own lives, to take the good with the bad.

The methodologists consider that “competent writing is frequently accepted as being the last language skill to be acquired for native speakers of the language as well as for foreign/second language learners” (Hamp and Heasley 2006: 2). That is why it is absolutely evident and natural that for the majority of the EFL learners, English writing is quite difficult and even challenging. Nevertheless, *fluency* is considered one of the most difficult writing aspects. The scholars tend to explain it in terms of difficulty to maintain the coherence of the written passage, to make the writing tone and expression clear. Moreover, T. Hedge considers that “the nature of writing itself is not interesting enough to motivate English learners to practice regularly” (Hedge 1991: 6). It should be considered that writing is a very time-consuming activity. The teachers know quite well that for some students it takes much longer than for the others to write even a very short essay. There are students that never finish their writing in classroom. Thus, it is difficult to practice writing only in the classroom, having students with very different abilities, level of English proficiency and even pace. Another obstacle to practice regular writing is the awareness that it will be read by someone, to someone, or, what is worse, it will be evaluated. That is why diary writing is one of the good solutions which could solve certain problems at a time. The teacher should be aware that it is extremely important to encourage diary writing, in its first phase, to be a self-organising exercise of putting down some very personal facts. The students should not be embarrassed by the so-called “someone’s appreciation”, they should be daily prepared to record his life, practicing his writing abilities. Their main goal is to develop their writing skill, while the teacher’s role is to convince his/her students the more they practice writing the better they will succeed, the more self-confident they will become.

A large number of scholars have emphasized the benefits of the diary/journal practice for the process of developing writing skills. Thus, it seems undeniable it is a real learning technique that makes the students attentive to their own lives, making them discover significant aspects, understand and overcome their own fears and frustrations, in order to increase the ability to interrelate to others. For such scholars as R. White and V. Arndt, keeping a diary/journal is extremely helpful as: “This technique has been found to be an effective and productive means of

arousing interest in writing, which, at the same time, develops fluency of expression. It also helps students to become aware of why they wish to communicate their ideas and to regard writing not only as a means of personal expression, but also a dialogue in written language with the reader” (White and Arndt 1991: 67). Moreover, J. Lagan is convinced that writing a diary/journal can help the students develop “the habit of thinking on paper and show how ideas can be discovered in the process of writing” (Lagan 2000: 14).

We are also convinced that diary / journal writing is a way to reduce the psychological distance between the students and the teacher, and enhance their reciprocal trust. Consequently, an encouraging learning atmosphere is necessary along with a high learning motivation in order to integrate the students into this kind of informal writing.

The problem of correction in the diary writing, though, remains. This activity should not become a source of the students’ mistakes for the teacher to be checked and corrected. All the same, the students would be confused about the quality of their writing, the aspects that should be improved if they were not given the error diagnosis and constructive feedback. R. White and V. Arndt, in their work *Process Writing*, have stated that “Because writers have to achieve a high degree of autonomy and self-sufficiency, it is very important to promote ways of self-correcting from an early stage [...]. Inevitably, we teachers will want to draw attention to language items which seem to be important to us as readers” (White and Arndt 1991: 172). From their point of view, the teachers are supposed to focus on the following:

- *Concentrate on language errors which have global rather than local effects.*
- *Do not attempt to cover too many repairs.* It is quite impossible for learners to cope with too many problems simultaneously (White and Arndt 1991: 172).

From our point of view, it is not always a good idea to select errors to be corrected. It would be better to make an agreement that the grammatical errors will be highlighted, while the language ones will be commented.

Analysing all possible benefits of the diary /journal keeping for developing students’ writing skills we have come to discover that the

process of writing is reaching a higher level because this innocent daily activity, imperceptibly, works with such important writing skills as:

- **Gain Focus.** Daily challenges can be coped easier, taking notes. Thus, diary keeping imposes thinking and introspection and, consequently, it helps to clarify thoughts and gain focus.
- **Creativity.** The ability to materialize students' thoughts can be a real art. So, a diary sets free creativity and enhances the talent within them. The personal diary becomes a "partner of conversation" and they tend to be clear and inventive in the way they present their lives. Therefore, diaries tap students' creativity increasing their will to write and share outcomes.
- **Planning.** Practicing this self-referential writing, the students get used to be more organized and responsible. They know that they should keep the pace, and record daily their impressions and emotions.
- **Critical attitude to themselves.** The students are the first readers of their own diaries. They have the possibility to judge their own behaviour and reactions, according to the recordings. They will be gradually able to analyse the quality of the chronicled facts.

Considering the process of diary writing we found out a significant impact on personal growth. Hence, such benefits can be listed:

- **Development and Personality Growth.** Diaries are helpful in students' growth, since they help to cope with negative feelings, to repress them. Thus, the students learn to control their lives and relieve their minds of malice by writing diaries. The diary is a chance to become better.
- **Discovering an Alter-Ego.** Diaries become the place to open the heart to, the most intimate and the safest friend. Becoming a part of the daily life, this writing activity turns out a real ceremony that helps the students to discover and know themselves better.
- **Development of the Emotional Intimacy.** Having a diary is a process of both self-expression and self-reflection. Rereading the recorded experiences is similar to listening to themselves and revealing the emotional scenery of who they actually are. It goes without saying that this sense of intimacy with themselves opens the possibility for better emotional intimacy with others.
- **Catharsis.** Diaries are good opportunities for catharsis. They help students in venting out locked feelings and unexpressed annoyance. They

moderate such emotions as anger, guilt, and feelings of disgust. It is possible diaries make the students better. Whatever anxieties the students have, they can let them out on a diary. Students' genuine darkest secrets or just a funny thought can be shared here.

- **Building Memories.** Some even trivial details of events in the students' past are something they start to cherish as they get older. By keeping a thorough diary, such moments are documenting that are worth writing about.
- **Brainstorming New Ideas.** Students should be encouraged to brainstorm ideas without being emotionally involved in an outcome using a diary.
- **One's Map Evolution.** A diary maintains details of what is written inside of it. The students will notice the evolution of their own handwriting, discovering how it reflects their psychological state of being.

We are very enthusiastic about the large amount of writing skills and personal qualities a diary can develop and consider it a real challenge for those who are not afraid of practicing something new and provocative. Our purpose was just to highlight the importance of diary /journal writing pointing out its benefits. Speaking about the methods, as with any teaching method, there is no universal way to approach journal writing. If the students are self-confident and trust their instructor, they commence to reflect and write about their real, daily concerns. It inevitably will lead to valuable and comforting feedback.

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