

Using Journal Writing to enhance EFL Learners' Reflective and Critical Thinking Skills:

A Case Study

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Abstract: The use of journal writing has been researched for a variety of purposes, but little evidence proves that journal writing can promote critical thinking skills. Journal writing can have several practices based on the aims of the instructor. One common purpose of journal writing, according to different scholars, is to evoke learners' reflection and thoughts. The aim of this research is to develop English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Students' critical thinking skills through journal writing assignment. This study adopts the hypothesis of: if students wrote a monthly journal on what they have studied throughout the whole period of a month, their reflection and critical thinking skills would improve. To test or prove this hypothesis and to collect the necessary data, a descriptive-qualitative method is adopted based on a questionnaire administered to twenty students randomly selected enrolled at Master in English language Class, besides a semi-structured interview with ten teachers at the English Department, University of Sidi Bel Abbes. The main findings reveal positive perceptions concerning developing students' critical thinking skills through journals writing. Most importantly, writing reflective journals proved to be an effective method also in promoting students' language proficiency level, and it was praised by both teachers and students who attribute positive comments for integrating journals writing in enhancing reflective practices. Thus, it is recommended to integrate such activity in English Classes.

Keywords: Critical thinking, EFL Learners, Journal writing, reflective practices, reflection

Introduction

Critical thinking is a new method of thinking, teaching and learning. It has very old roots according to the vision of Socrates 2500 years ago who developed the method of questioning and probing. Denying the ancient traditional method of learning, he set-up the need to ask deep questions to probe profoundly with thinking as an important process before we get to accept ideas. This method used for questioning called "Socratic Questioning" and best known as critical thinking, teaching strategy. Moreover, teaching critical thinking through journal writing is a new method and a tool to enhance the learning process, Reflective journal writing can offer means to enlighten learners' thinking habits in relation with their instructors in meaningful dialogue where both can examine their thinking patterns and reflect on them. According to Chapman (1990), "Students' writing in response to reading is one of the most reliable indices of what the student could derive from the text" (p.1).

Literature is an effective process of teaching that has four basic language skills, such as reading, writing, listening and speaking. Teachers of foreign languages must be wise when using literary texts in the classroom, since the kind of literature that language teachers can use with language learners is the original literature that includes real traditions and culture. The advantages of various kinds of literature to language teaching can be taken into consideration, back in the old years, the role of literature as a basic component and the source of the original texts of the language curriculum has gained strength. Discussions have taken place amongst language educators on: where, how, where, and why literature should be integrated into the curriculum of the EFL students.

I. Literature Review

Teaching critical thinking to literature classes has long been of a value ever since the middle ages till nowadays, In order to interpret claims, draw inferences, use inductive or deductive reasoning, assess or evaluate, and make judgments or solve problems based on both conceptualizations, reasoning and motivation, teachers rely on critical thinking. However; In spite of all the inquiries and lack of definitive answers about critical thinking yet people have a long-term query about this universal concept (Lewis & Smith, 1993). Empirical research suggests that people begin developing critical thinking competencies at a very young age. Through teaching and learning, an individual may train their brain to think sensibly and cohesively. Although adults often exhibit deficient reasoning, in theory all people can be taught to think critically. Lew and Schmidt (2007) made a study at a postsecondary institution in order to examine the extent to which students consider that journal writing enhances their learning. They found that “students’ beliefs about the usefulness of journal writing in enabling students to think and write reflectively are related to their beliefs about improving learning through frequent journal writing, and the use of the journal writing as an impression management tool, and as a means to feedback on team work” (p.579). Spaulding and Wilson (2002) also, after analysing 34 journal. They found that reflective journal writing can offer four benefits for the student. According to them, “journal writing is important for students as it serves as a permanent record of thoughts and experiences, establishes and maintains a relationship with the instructor, provides a safe outlet for frustrations and concerns; and aids internal dialogue”. Greiman and Convington (2007) studied the journal writing experiences of student teachers in order to gain insight into the process of developing reflective practitioners. They found that “students and teachers were somewhat comfortable with writing as a form of communication and perceived that journal writing went well. The participants in their study identified reflective thinking as the most frequent benefit of journal writing”.

A. Statement of the Problem

Teaching students critical thinking skills while writing literary tasks in EFL classes is the major problem of the most them because they are expected to give high level results. However, students specially the EFL students have a huge deal with their writing skill due to the lack of some writing practices, most of them depending on the teacher as a centered approach as well as the non-responsibility sense. Most of students are careless when it comes to writing a task seriously and take time to think about it as a chance to acquire new information or establish

some writing skills which would help them become a good problem solvers and better at performing arguments, as a result this study examine the effectiveness of teaching critical thinking in literature classes through writing reflective journals in order to develop students' thinking and writing skills .

B. Research Questions

This study offers the ability to answer the following question as you read carefully:

Q1: What is Journals Writing Activity?

Q2: Can Journals Writing develop EFL Students' CT Skills?

Q3: To what extent are journals writing effective in developing CT?

II. Methodology

This research has a descriptive qualitative nature that provides a comprehensive picture about the concerned problem of new critical thinkers in literature classes with the use of daily journals to develop their writing skills, as well as increasing their critical thinking practice and performance. The sample of twenty students consists of both male/female EFL learners of third year LMD at University of Sidi Bel Abbes randomly selected. In order to have significant valid results, a questionnaire was administered to learners besides a semi structured interview conducted with their teachers to find out the benefits of using journals writing in enhancing EFL Students' writing skills and critical thinking.

III. Results and Discussion

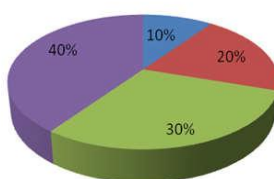
A. Students' Questionnaire

Q1: How often does your teacher encourage you about write your own reflective journal?

It is observed in table 10 that 04 of the participants answered that their teachers sometimes encourage them to write journals, while 02 of the students choose the answer frequently, and 06 of them said that their teachers rarely encourage them about writing journals. However, the rest 08 of the respondents answered that their teachers never encourage them to write journals.

Encouraging Students to Write Journals Writing

■ frequently ■ sometimes ■ rarely ■ never



Q2: Do you find that reflective journals writing interesting?

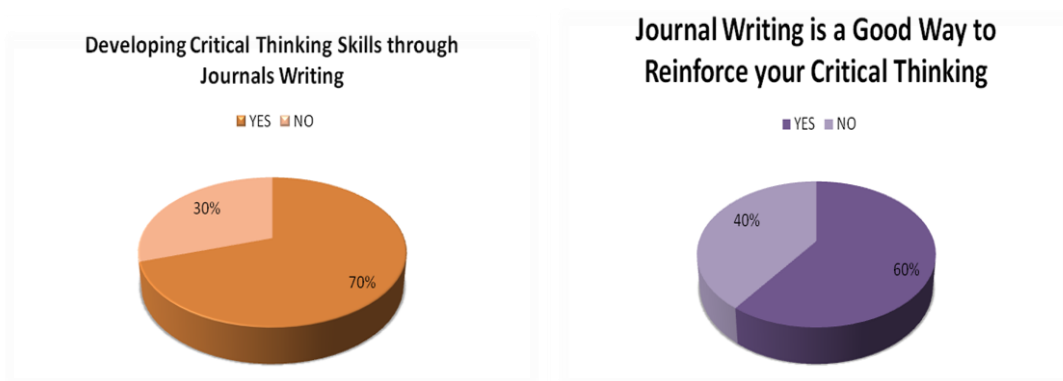
In fact 65% of the respondents have found that journal writing interesting. In contrast, 35% of the participants do not find it interesting. This seen as the majority of students will have the chance to create their own journals without limitation.

Q3: Do you think that writing reflective journals helped you to express your ideas and opinions?

11 students (55%) respond by “yes” , and This indicates that writing journals motivate them to write and build the students' confidence.

Q4: In your own opinion, journal writing is a good way to reinforce your critical thinking?

As it is demonstrated in both figures, 70% of the respondents have found that journal writing is a good way to reinforce critical thinking abilities. In contrast, 30% of the participants respond by no. The majority of students seen that journals writing reinforce their critical thinking skills.



B. Teachers' Semi-structured Interview

Question01: Do you think that journals writing can improve the learners' critical thinking ?

Most of our interviewees had long experiences of teaching literature and agree on the idea that journals writing is a useful method, as it helps students to learn and to develop writing skills in enjoyable way.

Question 02: According to you , does reflective journals writing assignment improve third year EFL students' course performance?

Answers to the second question showed that the majority of teachers of literature indicate that reflective journals writing has a significant effect in improving students' abilities in problem solving, they said that students are now well done performances which are mainly related to the writing skills gained from journals writing.

Question 03: In your opinion, does reflective journals writing enhance the learners' motivation to write and confidence?

Most of teachers of literature classes consider that the use of reflective journal writing in enhancing motivation and self-confidence adding that it is the best way of improving learning in general and the writing skills in particular

Question 04: Do you think that reflective journals writing can develop the students' knowledge and critical thinking?

In literature classes, most of the teachers agree on the idea that journals writing are powerful methods to achieve better results such as developing the students' critical thinking and knowledge

IV. Implications

The goal of this research is to examine the use of writing journals as an effective tool to develop students' critical thinking and writing in the English Department at Sidi Bel Abbes University. Besides the study aimed to reach the objective of developing students' mind, not only for class tasks and applications but also as an alternative to their minds.

Generally speaking, the investigation conducted for this study has shown various positive results. Basically, the students' questionnaire reveals that the majority of students have positive attitudes toward journals writing. Actually, the results implicate that the majority of students in The English language department are aware of that importance of the reflective journals writing. In fact, the questionnaire reveals that the majority of students have positive attitudes towards enhancing their critical thinking through journals writing. The questionnaire has also shown that even students are familiar with other strategies like analysis and evaluation, and other various process like blooms taxonomy, they are more productive when critical minds are used. Yet they could extremely gain several benefits. Students who write journals were able to better define their purpose to develop their skills especially in analysing , applying literature theories and to be acquainted with new vocabulary. Generally, journals writing can enhance idea and provide a space to students where they can effectively express their own impressions and opinions. At last, the majority of students have appreciated the reflective journals writing to foster their critical thinking skills as alternatives to traditional writing instruments for the reason that they are hopefully desired to learn with and to experience new writing strategies to develop their critical thinking skills.

Conclusion

The results showed that most students encourage the idea of writing journals to develop their critical thinking. Clearly this study indicated the positive effects of the use of reflective journal writing in enhancing motivation and self-confidence, improving learning in general and the writing skills in particular. In addition to that, we indicated that the students who used to

write paragraphs voluntarily had better attitudes than students who just wrote when instructed by their teachers.

We can prove that using reflective journal writing is beneficial to students' critical thinking as demonstrated by the results of this study. Additionally, the students who voluntarily wrote their own paragraphs were more motivated to practice writing than the others and had a much better perception of their skills. Regardless of the academic level of each student, writing journals is considered as a hobby that anybody would like to practice and reflective journal writing can be used to develop the writing skills.

Using reflective journal writing in EFL teaching has the added advantages of increasing motivation and self-confidence, and improving learning. Moreover, reflective journal writing makes the writing course enjoyable, motivating, relevant, and exciting. Thus, students should be aware of the benefits gained from reflecting. Finally, the results obtained from both the teachers' interview and the students' questionnaire answer the questions of the study. Moreover, the findings of this study indicate that teaching critical thinking through reflective journals writing has a significant effect in improving students' abilities in problem solving and well done performance which is mainly related to the writing skills. On the whole, the findings of the study could open up areas for research on different uses of critical thinking and which would change learners' attitudes positively, and raise awareness among them of how much beneficial it is developing your writing skills not only for the field of critical thinking, but also in different educational fields.

Appendices

Appendix A: Learners' Questionnaire

Dear students, this questionnaire serves as a data collection tool for a research project. The research tackles the subject of Teaching critical thinking through journals writing in literature classes. You are kindly requested to answer honestly and seriously the questions below to help us to reach the objective of the study.

Section one : Background Information

Gender : a-male : b- female :

Level : Master two students of English, University of Sidi Bel Abbes.

Do you consider your level in English?

-Very good : - good : -average : - poor :

Section two : reflective journals writing in EFL classes

Q1 : Do you like studying literature ?

- Yes : - No :

Q2 : Do you face difficulties while studying literature?

- Yes : - No :

Q3 : What kind of struggles you face while studying literature ?

a- The course content is so long

b- Easily get bored

c- Hard to focus in literature class

d- Teacher' s methodology is boring

e- Lack of motivating tools

Q4 : What do you think of the teacher' s methodology in teaching literature ?

-Ambiguous : - Boring : Exciting :

Q5 : "Keeping a personal journal a daily in-depth analysis and evaluation of your experiences is a high-leverage activity that increases self-awareness and enhances all the endowments and the synergy among them." Stephen R.Covey. Do you usually write your own reflective journal ?

Yes : - no :

Q6 : How often does your teacher encourage you about write your own reflective journal?

-Frequently : -sometimes : -rarely : -never :

Q7 : Do you find that reflective journals writing intresting ?

- Yes : - no :

Q8 : Do you think that writing reflective journals helped you to express your ideas and opinions?

-yes : - no :

Q9 : Do reflective journals writing enhance your motivation to write and confidence?

- Yes ; - no :

Section three : critical thinking through journals writing

Q10 : In your own opinion, journal writing is a good way to reinforce your critical thinking?

-strongly agree : : agree : -disagree : -strongly disagree :

Q11 : Do you think that the continuation of writing reflective journals would be the main reason of being a convincing critical thinker ?

-Yes : No :

Q12 :Do you think that journals writing can develop your knowledge and critical thinking?

-Yes : -no :

Q13 :Do you find that journals writing is necessary for you to develop your critical thinking skills?

-Yes : -no :

Thank you for your time

Appendix B: Teachers' Semi Structured Interview

Dear teachers :

We would be grateful if you answer these questions which are mainly focused on Teacher's objectives about Teaching critical thinking through journals writing in literature classes.

Q1 :Do you think that journals writing can improve the learners' critical thinking ?

- Yes : - No:

Q 2 : According to you , does reflective journal writing assignment improve third year EFL students' course performance?

- yes : - no :

Q 3 : In your opinion, does reflective journals writing enhance the learners' motivation to write and confidence?

-yes : -no :

Q 4 : Do you think that reflective journals writing can develop the students' knowledge and critical thinking?

- yes : - no :

Thank you for your time

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