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Journal writing – students’ voices¹

Abstract

Developing writing skills in L2 is challenging. Writing is believed to be time-consuming, difficult, boring, limiting and not rewarding. All of these challenges result in students having a negative attitude towards writing, both in L1 and in L2. Journal writing is a tool which helps students develop their writing and language skills, establish a regular writing habit, while at the same time allowing them space for self-expression. The present study aims at finding out how students perceive journal writing. The participants were 55 first year students of English Studies, who participated in a creative writing course. It was discovered that students view journal writing as pleasant; that it helped them in writing their final assignment; and that it helped them develop their language skills. The study also found that offering students writing prompts may be useful in the course of writing a journal, especially for those students who lack ideas for their entries. Finally, recommendations concerning the use of journals in any language class are provided. The study suggests that if administered properly and understood by the students, journal writing has the potential to help students change their attitude towards writing for the better and improve their writing and language skills.

Keywords: journal, journal writing, Creative writing course, developing writing and language skills

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Introduction

Writing has never been students' favourite language skill. There are many reasons underlying this phenomenon. First, the very nature of writing does not appeal to language learners. It is time-consuming to produce a decent piece of writing. Writing is an individual activity, which means there is nobody to talk during the process of writing. Very often students have no freedom in choosing the topics they want to write about. As stated by Hashemi & Mirzaei (2015: 108), "all writers need to relate to what they are writing about, and be motivated by their feelings about a topic." However, the topics offered by teachers and based on national curriculum requirements are not very relevant to students, who usually do not have much to say about them (and to write about) (Tuan, 2010; Byrne, 1991; Tho, 2000). What is more, the topics are often repeated every year (both in speaking and writing) and may simply not be any longer attractive for the students. Unlike in real life situations, the feedback the students get from their teachers on their writing concerns mostly the correctness of their language, which is another reason discouraging students from writing. The students are aware that their mistakes will be underlined, corrected and graded (Hamp & Heasley, 2006: 2). However, the message (if heard at all) itself will probably be less important than the correctness with which the students' ideas were communicated. On top of that stands the pressure of time, under which the students are usually made to write. Learners usually associate writing with writing timed essays during their classes, which is stressful. Some students are not able to finish their writing assignments within a prescribed period of time, not to mention the difficulty of brainstorming ideas within the limited time span (Tuan, 2010). Weir (1990: 61) notes that writing outside the academic context does not have a time limited nature – we normally are not made to produce a piece of writing within a given time frame. Writing is a complex process, which does not only take much time to write but also to gather the ideas, do some research (depending on the topic), and edit the written text. However, writing in the school context does not cater for these complexities.

There are three factors that are considered the most important elements in improving ESL/EFL students' writing abilities: "practice, attitude, and individual tutoring" (Mlynarczyk, 2013: 37). Mlynarczyk believes that all of them are central to journal writing as "journals give students extensive writing practice, the opportunity to express and perhaps to change their attitudes toward writing, and the chance to develop a personal relationship with the teacher" (p. 36). Casanave (2011) adds that "journal writing in almost all its forms can help people learn to write with fluency, write without fear, and write in ways that connect ideas to the self. [...] it can help writers engage with readings, events in their lives, issues in the news, and topics and writing problems in academic work" (p. 3). Journal writing gives students the potential to write about topics that are interesting for them. As Kambara emphasizes,

prescribed journal topics requiring students to write in their second language about unfamiliar topics present a double barrier to students' feelings about self-efficacy. However, allowing students to journal about topics on which they are experts or are highly motivated to investigate can remove one of these barriers and enable them to focus on communicating their chosen topic in the target language" (2020: 384).

As the aim of the journal is to “encourage students to become involved and interested in writing” (White & Arndt, 1991: 63) without concerning themselves much about errors and time pressure (Spaventa, 2000: 168), students’ journals are mostly written at home, so there is no time pressure imposed on the learners. Also, what matters is the content and not the accuracy, which means that journals are not checked for mistakes. This allows the students to focus on the message they want to communicate and not so much on the form. As shown in the study by Hashemi and Mirzaei (2015), the students “felt very happy and relieved that they did not have to worry about grammar, punctuation, or spelling and said we (instructors) had given them choice and power” (p. 106). In this way, writing may become enjoyable and not stressful for the students. Finally, journal writing may work as a platform where the student’s voice will be heard by their instructors, resulting in creating a stronger bond between him and his students.

What is a journal

A journal, just like a diary, is a form of personal / reflective writing. However, journals are different from dairies. A diary is usually “a chronological record of events without the necessary reflection that characterizes journals” (Casanave, 2011: 5). In a school context, journal writing is usually done in response to something (an experience, discussions, readings, research work) and to communicate the writer’s feelings or experiences to a teacher or a peer reader. However, journal writing may be done also only for private purposes; in such a case, it is not addressed to any audience, including the teacher. Spaventa (2000: 168) writes that journals are “notebooks in which writers keep a record of ideas, opinions, and descriptions of daily life. Journals help writers develop their creativity.” Hashemi & Mirzaei add that “journal writing refers to any writing that students perform that challenges the students to reflect on past situations and how they might perform if similar situations arise” (2015: 104).

Fulwiler (1987b: 2–3) (cited in Casanave, 2011: 4) summarized the main characteristics of journals in the following way:

Journals are much like speech written down in their use of informal language and first person; they allow writers to observe, question, speculate, digress, and show self-awareness; and entries are frequent, sometimes long, and self-initiated.

Gardner (1999: 2) (cited in Casanave, 2011: 4–5) describes journal writing for colleges writers in the following way:

Journals are [...] meant to be open, safe places where writers of all levels can explore, assert tentatively, change gears and topics at will. They are places to try out ideas and spelling and even punctuation, places to practice writing, if that is the writer’s choice. Although school-assigned journals do have an additional audience – the teacher – journals also provide a somewhat private place for a writer to talk to and listen to herself. And if the teacher uses journals humanely, then they also provide a place for students’ voices to be heard by the teacher.

Casanave (2011: 5) provides the following definition of journal writing:

[...] it is a risk-free, personal, reflective, and responsive writing activity done regularly over time in a style that suits the writer's personality and proficiency level. Among its many purposes are to help multilingual writers build fluency and confidence in writing and to help learners engage with ideas, reflect on self and issues, and practice expressing ideas in written language to real audience (teachers, peers, self). Journal writing is unconstrained, in most cases, by academic conventions and generally uncorrected for language errors that do not impede comprehensibility. Instead, teachers try to respond to students' ideas and to help learners expand their thinking as well as their ways of using written language.

Casanave believes that what distinguishes journal writing from other types of writing is reflection. As reflective writing she understands writing that:

(1) engages the writer's feelings, emotions, interests, or curiosities; (2) connects the writer with something (e.g., with another aspect of the self, with another idea, with another person, with experiences and subject matter); and (3) helps the writer develop the awareness needed to understand the self, an experience, an idea, or an event in expanded ways. (2011: 8).

The length of a journal entry depends on who writes it, how old the writer is, and what the level of their language proficiency is. As Casanave writes (2011: 6), journal entries are "usually ungraded and uncorrected for language errors. This is because the main purposes of journals are reflection and communication with self and/or one or more other readers, such as teachers or peers." When commenting on the writer's entries, the teacher focuses on the content of the entry and the ideas that the writer expressed rather than the mistakes made.

In my creative writing class, journals take the form of a paper notebook. Every student is asked to prepare a notebook at the beginning of the semester, in which they will write their journal entries. The students are asked to write their entries once a week. The length of every entry should not be shorter than one page (A5 format). I always hope that they will treat their journals as their space, where their "conversations of the mind" (as called by Mlynarczyk) can take place. They are encouraged to treat journals as their notebooks and to write about the topics that are important and interesting for them as I want to give them space to create something that will be theirs and about which they will decide. During the many years my students have kept their journals I have noticed that some of them decorated their entries with drawings; some used scrapbooking technique to make it more theirs. Everything depended on the author and how they felt about their journal. However, the students are always reminded that finally their journals will be read by me; hence, if they do not wish me to read something, they should not write about it in their journal. At the beginning of the semester the students are always presented with a list of topics and questions to choose from. The list of the topics used in the class during winter semester 2021/2022 may be seen in Appendix 1. I always offer such an option in case students lack ideas what to write about (which is a problem, as found in many studies, e.g. Rodliyah 2019 but also the present study) or would simply like to experiment with a topic they would not come up with themselves. Finally, students write their entries outside of

class, which is supposed to help them feel that journal writing is something more than just a regular classroom assignment.

Benefits of journal writing

Journal writing in the field of L2 learning has many benefits that are both linguistic and non-linguistic.

Foster learners' writing motivation

The greatest problem that language instructors face when teaching writing is the students' negative attitude towards this skill. After primary school and high school education, students do not enjoy writing much, both in Polish and in English (Majchrzak, 2018). They see writing as boring, limiting and difficult. Students are not often asked to produce a comprehensible piece of writing that will present a topic of their own choice. Mostly, students are used to speak or write to present their knowledge about a given subject and/or in order to show the range of their vocabulary and language structures. However, seldom are they given chance to express in writing what they really care about. Journal writing is believed to help them view writing in more positive light as it (both its content and form) depends mostly on the students and is supposed to be an outlet for their own emotions and experiences. It is the student who decides about the topic of their journal entry. As White & Arndt (1991: 67) state,

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 a reader.

What is more, “journal writing helps learners write better and better day by day since it provides learners with more opportunities to freely write about what they wish to whenever they feel like writing” (Tuan, 2010: 82).

Develop writing skills

We all know that practice makes perfect. Also, in the case of writing, the more you practise writing, the better you become. Hamp & Heasley (2006: 5) put it in the following way:

The most obvious way you can help yourself become a good writer is by writing. We strongly suggest that in addition to completing the tasks, you also keep your own personal journal. Buy yourself a notebook, and try to write down some ideas every day, in English, about anything that interests you [...]. You will surprise yourself by producing pages and pages of writing.

Yinger (1985, cited in Hashemi & Mirzaei, 2015: 105) says that “journal writing also improves students' writing skills by: 1) focusing on processes rather than on products, 2) emphasizing expressive and personal aspects and 3) serving as a record of thoughts and expression that is available for rereading.”

Journal writing, by building a regular writing habit, can increase students' writing performance, including writing fluency, but also accuracy, meaning that the students develop their English language skills through journal writing, such as vocabulary, grammar etc. As Tuan's study (2010) shows, both students' writing fluency, accuracy as well as writing scores improved after a semester of journaling in English.

Develop language skills

Apart from developing students' writing skills, journals offer an opportunity to develop their language skills. When writing in their journals, students are offered an opportunity to experiment (more or less consciously) with what they have learned, be it new lexical items, grammar structures or punctuation. Such a relationship was discovered in a study by Hashemi & Mirzaei (2015). In their study, a group of medical students kept reflective journals as an element of their English language course. After one semester of the course the students stated that learning English with the use of journal writing technique, which included finding the vocabulary, using the dictionary in different ways and not worrying about grammar, had had a positive impact on their learning (p. 107).

Kambara (2020) found that journals allow students to access the full range of vocabulary and grammar structures in their repertoires if they are not limited in their writing by prescribed journal prompts (p. 388). This means that if the students are passionate about the project they want to write about, they will be more eager to check, use and hopefully remember the words that they are not familiar with. On the other hand, it may happen that the entries about which the students feel very passionate and emotional about, despite being longer and more detailed, may be less comprehensible and less accurate.

Foster self-expression

According to Artof (1992, quoted in Tin, 2000: 49), journal writing may be

a powerful tool to find our own untapped creative power, uncover our family history, learn to see the world more clearly, heal unsolved issues, understand our fears, and explore our motivation. Through personal writing, we can develop both writing skills and awareness, can develop greater awareness and interpersonal understanding, increasing the ability to relate to others.

Journals offer space in which students may voice topics that are important and interesting for them. As journal writing is addressed mostly at the very student and occasionally at the teacher, it serves as a platform where "controversial or sensitive issues that are addressed in a lively manner in the journal are sometimes discussed only reluctantly, if at all, in the classroom" (Parkyn, 2000, cited in Hashemi & Mirzaei, 2015: 109). Journals offer an opportunity for the shy students, who are usually silent during the class, to find their voice on paper. In this way, every student in the class becomes actively engaged in language learning practice.

Be source of ideas

Langan (2000: 14) notices that apart from the fact that journals make writing a familiar part of the writer's life, they help to develop a habit of thinking on paper, and that they show how ideas can be developed in the process of writing. Journal writing serves "as a continuing source of ideas for papers." During the winter semester of 2021/2022, I treated journals as a tool to help my students find topics for their final task, which was their own autobiography. When presented with this final assignment at the very beginning of the course, students usually start to panic. They believe they are too young and too inexperienced to be able to write an autobiography of themselves. Journals offered them space where they started their own search for the topic of their autobiography – what they like about their life; what challenges they face every day; how they cope with their life. Reading their final autobiographies I noticed that some of them grew out of their journal entries. Some of them even seemed to take the form of journal entries. It turned out that the students' journals, apart from offering the students a chance to explore their lives, allowed them to find the form which transpired to be the best to tell their own story in their final task.

Build a close bonding between teachers and learners

One of the social functions that journals perform is creating a bond between a student and a teacher. As Casanave points out, "a journal written back and forth between a teacher and student, [...] provides each participant a window on the other that is individually tailored in a way that is not possible in a whole class setting. In fact, sometimes journals are the only way that busy teachers and students can get to know each other personally" (2011: 9). Journal writing minimizes the distance between the students and the teacher. Students build relation with their instructors benefits of which are later seen in other aspects of learning and formal writing. Also, in the case of shy students a journal becomes a platform thanks to which their voice may be heard by the teacher. In Tuan's study (2010), the students appreciated that the teacher introduced the very idea of journal writing into their regular classes; what is more, they were grateful that he spent so much time reading and commenting on their entries as they realized how much time it must have taken.

Journal writing offers also many benefits to teachers. According to Garmon, "journal writing helps instructors know and understand their students better and therefore tailor instruction to meet their particular needs" (1998, cited in Hashemi & Mirzaei, 2015: 104). What is more, "through reading and responding to learners' journal entries, teachers are able to measure each learners' competence and understand their needs, thoughts, and feelings, which helps teachers accommodate their teaching ways to learners' preferences and give learners appropriate assistance to their problems along the writing course" (Tuan, 2010: 87). Teachers, thanks to journals, get to know their students better, learn about their everyday lives, their passions but also challenges they face. They are also able to check how they manage in terms of communicating in the English language as journal entries provide an insight into the students' linguistic abilities. However, what seems most important is that they "get acquainted with their students on a much deeper level – indeed, to see them as people with hopes and dreams, as experts, and as cocreators of knowledge rather than as receptacles in which to deposit knowledge" Kambara (2020: 389).

Research methodology

Research questions

Similarly to Rodliyah's study (2019), the aim of the present study was to find out how students perceive keeping a journal as an out-of-class assignment during one semester of the Creative writing course. The present research focused on finding out how helpful journal writing was in writing the final task and developing language skills; how enjoyable it was for the students; how helpful the writing prompts provided by the instructor were; and how willing the students were to continue writing their journals after the course completion. Hence, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ 1: How helpful in writing the final task (autobiography) was writing your journal entries?

RQ 2: How helpful in developing your language skills was writing your journal entries?

RQ 3: How enjoyable / pleasant was writing your journal entries?

RQ 4: When writing your journal entries, did you use the prompts given by the instructor at the beginning of the course?

RQ 5: Are you planning to continue writing your journal entries next semester?

Participants

The students of the creative writing course participated in the study. They were doing their first year of B.A. studies at the faculty of English studies, both full-time and part-time. 55 students filled in the questionnaire in the end. The students were aged between 19 and 25. However, there were also students who were slightly older as they decided to start their studies long after graduating from high school. The study group consisted of both women and men. However, as the questionnaire was anonymous, it is difficult to state what the balance between the two sexes was.

The level of students' knowledge of the English language during their freshman year of studies ranges between B1–B2 level. Most of the students are rather fluent both in speaking and writing; however, some of them struggle when faced with having to produce a text in English.

The students who start their studies at the faculty of English should have a reasonable writing experience in both languages, namely Polish (their mother tongue) and English, their first foreign language. They have experience in writing within many formal and informal genres in both languages, both from their primary as well as secondary education. Among these were advertisements, invitations, emails, formal and informal letters, argumentative essays, and other pieces of writing prescribed in the school curriculum. Very seldom do students write for themselves something which is not their school assignment. Only some of them – and it concerns mostly women – keep their journals in Polish.

Instrumentation and procedure

The study was carried out during the winter semester 2021/2022 during the creative writing course. Journal writing was treated as one of the obligatory elements of the course. The students were asked to write their journal entries once a week. The specific guidelines together with the topics suggested for their journal writing can be found in Appendix 1. The instructor did not read the journals regularly during the course. The students were told that the journals would be read at the end of the course. However, the entries were neither corrected nor graded. Only a comment on their content was provided by the instructor.

At the end of the course the students were asked to fill in an online questionnaire, which focused on the whole Creative writing course during which the students were prepared to write their final assignment, namely autobiography. The questionnaire can be seen in Appendix 2. It was prepared and distributed in the Polish language. Within this questionnaire, there were 5 questions that focused on journal writing. It took a student 10 minutes on average to fill in the whole questionnaire.

The students were asked to fill in the online questionnaire outside of the class. The questionnaire was prepared in Google documents. The moment the students filled it in, the results were automatically saved and could be viewed by the researchers.

Results and discussion

Journal writing and the final task (autobiography)

One of the reasons students kept their journals was to help them find topics for writing their final assignment – an autobiography. Hence, the first question checked how helpful in writing the final task was journal writing. The results are presented below.

Students' answers	% of students
not helpful at all	5%
not very helpful	16%
so-so	20%
helpful	31%
very helpful	28%

Question 1.

How helpful in writing the final task (autobiography) was writing your journal entries?

The results show that 59% of students held journal writing as helpful in writing their own autobiography while for 21% of students journal entries did not help much. 20% of students claimed that writing their journal was moderately helpful. The results may be explained in terms of the students' attitude towards journal writing and the content of their journal entries. Those students who treated their journals as their space to experiment with writing and the content of their own choice had a chance to try themselves at writing long before they started working on their autobiography. Those who did not treat

journals as a tool that would help them in writing their final assignment did not feel at the end of the course that journal writing was helpful for them. However, in order to be sure that the aforementioned explanations are the true reasons for the students' perception of how helpful journals were, the students should have been asked directly, which the questionnaire used in this study did not cater for.

Another explanation for these results may be the very topics the students discussed in their entries. There were students who experimented with their journals and wrote on many topics important to them. There were also students who tried the topics from the list offered to them at the beginning of the semester. In both cases, those students had a chance to see what interests them and which sphere of their life they would like to develop in their autobiography. However, some students did not see journals as such a platform. For them, journal writing was another mundane task, maybe even too childish or girlish for their new academic life. It concerned both female as well as male students. In such cases, the students mostly commented on their everyday life, in which they did not find many topics to develop in their weekly entries and later in their final autobiography.

Journal writing and developing language skills

As has been mentioned in the theoretical section of the present article, journal writing is very often used in order to help students develop their language skills. It is also one of the reasons why journal writing is used in the creative writing course. Hence, it was of interest to check whether students notice the improvement of their language skills after one semester of keeping a journal in English.

Students' answers	% of students
not helpful at all	5%
not very helpful	2%
so-so	16%
helpful	26%
very helpful	51%

Question 2.

How helpful in developing your language skills was writing your journal entries?

77% students claimed that keeping a journal helped them develop their language skills. Among them as many as 51% said that it helped them a lot. Only 7% of students said that writing journal entries did not help them develop their language skills. The number of students who saw journal writing as an element of the course that helped them become better in English is huge. Writing in English (or in any foreign language) provides students with an opportunity to put all their linguistic knowledge into practice. They have a chance to experiment with the knowledge they have, but also with the one they have just acquired during other subjects. They may also extend their linguistic knowledge using outside sources if they wish to write about topics they have never discussed in the English language (as observed by Kambara, 2020). In all of these cases, the students either practice, revise

or learn new language which allows them to communicate what they wish. Writing in English provides students with an opportunity to practise the use of grammar all the time. They need to make choices about the structures they need to use to communicate what they are planning to. Not to mention other aspects of writing such as punctuation to name one. However, those students who did not treat journal writing seriously and wrote on topics which reflected their everyday life did not have many opportunities to expand their lexical repertoire or practise grammar structures. The entries of the students who decided to write about these issues were very often uninteresting and reminded the instructor of mini essays written at schools about the typical topics distributed by the teacher. The same was observed by Kambara (2020) in the case of the students who were made to write their journal entries on the basis of given (and uninteresting for the students) writing prompts.

Journal writing and pleasure

It has been mentioned before that students hold a rather negative attitude towards writing. Hence, it was interesting to see whether students share this attitude towards journal writing or whether they perceive it as an enjoyable activity.

Students' answers	% of students
not enjoyable at all	7%
not very enjoyable	5%
so-so	24%
enjoyable	24%
very enjoyable	40%

Question 3.

How enjoyable / pleasant was writing your journal entries?

64% of students claimed that writing in their journal was enjoyable or very enjoyable. Only 12% of students did not enjoy this element of the course. The explanation for these results may be similar to the ones presented above. Namely, general students' attitude may have influenced not only their perception of how helpful journal writing was in writing their final task and developing their language skills but also of how enjoyable the activity was for them. Those students who did not enjoy it may not have really grasped the very aim of the task and the way they could go about it. They might have created their entries on the basis of what they believed they had to do and did not use the freedom that was offered to them. Hence, their low level of experienced pleasure from performing this task. However, for a great majority of the students, writing their journal entries was an enjoyable activity.

Journal writing prompts

Journal writing prompts are very often used in order to help students find topics they can write about. In order to provide students with such a choice, the instructor presented a list of journal prompts for the students at the beginning of the semester. When writing their

weekly entries, the students could (but did not have to) choose a topic or a question from the list. The chart below shows the proportion between the students who did and did not use the provided journal prompts throughout the semester.

Students' answers	% of students
Yes	49%
No	51%

Question 4.

When writing your journal entries, did you use the prompts given by the instructor at the beginning of the course?

Half of the students used and the other half did not use the writing prompts. In order to understand the students' behaviour, the students were asked what the reason was for their using / not using journal prompts.

Why the students did not use the journal writing prompts

Many of the students who did not use the offered journal writing prompts explained that they preferred to write on the topics of their own choice. They said that they usually knew what to write about and did not need to use the ones from the list. Some of them from the very beginning had an idea for their journal and did not look for any help in inspiring them what to write about. However, there were also students who simply forgot that they were provided with a list of journal prompts at the very beginning of the course. They often explained that they started writing spontaneously and simply forgot about the list. In order to avoid such a situation in the future, it may be a good idea to present a journal prompt every week. Such a solution will both remind the students of their journal and inspire them to use the suggested topic (if needed).

Why the students used the journal writing prompts

The students reported that the proposed journal writing prompts helped them when they lacked their own ideas what to write about. In this way they did not waste much time on looking for some good topic to write about. Some students admitted that they were looking for some original idea for their journal. The topics provided at the beginning of the course transpired to be interesting for them. They even said that they would never think about writing on such topics. For some of them, they were especially helpful at the very beginning of writing their entries, when they did not yet know how their journal should look like. They also said that answering the questions from the list was more interesting for them than simply writing about their everyday life.

Providing the students with ready journal prompts may prove beneficial for the students, especially at the very start of keeping a journal. Not all of the students are sure how their journal entries are supposed to look like and what is expected from them. By giving them a list of topics to choose from, we provide them with help and inspiration with which it will be easier for them to get used to writing in their journals. What we should remember

about, though, is to remind the students about the list. The students always have a choice not to pick a topic from the suggested list; however, some of them may get stuck in reporting on their daily life, forgetting that keeping a journal creates far wider opportunities than simply writing about what they do every day.

Journal writing in the future

Journal writing is an activity that provides the students with a lot of benefits, such as developing their writing and language skills, thinking over everything they have been busy with, rethinking some of the tasks for their university classes. Hence, it was interesting to check whether students are planning to continue keeping their journals after the end of the course. The chart below presents the students' answers.

Students' answers	% of students
Yes	64%
No	36%

Question 5.

Are you planning to continue writing your journal entries next semester?

The majority of the students, namely 64%, stated that they were planning to continue writing their journal entries upon the course completion. 36% students from the present study reported that they did not intend to continue keeping their journals. In every case, the students were asked to provide a reason for their answer.

Why the students were not planning to continue writing their journal entries

Most of the students who were not planning to continue writing their entries stated that they do not have enough ideas what to write about. This was also mentioned in the study by Rodliyah (2019), where one of the students said: "It is not easy to write anything if the teacher doesn't give me the topic. Sometimes I just have no idea at all." The students in the present study often reported that it was because their life is not interesting enough to write about it. Although the autonomy and creativity of the students should be supported by encouraging them to choose their own topics, in the case of such students, it seems reasonable to provide them with a list of topics to choose from. In this way they will not get discouraged that they do not know what to write about. As Rodliyah observed in her study, "prompted journal writing will help prevent them from writer's block" (2019: 199). As some of the students mentioned that they are not good at writing about themselves, it is important to make sure that the list suggested includes topics that allow the students to focus on something else than themselves. In this way, they will get an opportunity to write on the range of different subjects and not only about themselves. However, always should the students be left with an opportunity to write what they are keen on; the list of topics should be treated as a resource they can always use but it should not limit them in any way from writing about their own topics.

Other reasons the students provided explaining why they would not keep their journals after the course completion were connected with being no good at regular writing, or having not enough time for this activity (it was also one of the disadvantages given by the students in Rodliyah's as well as Hashemi and Mirzaei's study). In such a case it may prove beneficial to ask the students to write their journal entries during their classes, as was done by Hashemi & Mirzaei (2015), where students wrote in their journals at the end of each class. Also, especially at the very beginning of introducing the element of journal writing, it may be a good idea to present the students with an idea of one line journal. In this journal, students write only one line of text per day every day. It will help them learn regularity and provide them with a sense of achievement as they will see that they are able to write one line every day without much effort.

There were also students who reported that they preferred to read than to write. A similar explanation was given by one of the learners of Tuan (2010) who when asked why he did not enjoy journal writing said that he liked practising English but by speaking with his roommate or listening to music, but not by writing a journal (p. 86). Other respondents in the present study said that they did not like journal writing, that they had a feeling it did not develop them, or that it was not interesting for them. The issue of boredom was voiced also by Rodliyah's students who said that having to write their entries twice a week was a bit boring. Probably, writing journal entries was especially boring for those students who did not use the list of topics or had problems finding a good topic to write about. However, the students who either had an idea for their journal or wrote on the topics from the list, perceived journal writing as an interesting and developing activity. Also, students may be asked to keep a passion project journal, which, as shown by Kambura (2020), is viewed positively by language learners as it provides them with an opportunity to write about their passions and hobbies.

There were also students who mentioned that it was difficult for them to transfer their thoughts on paper. The students in Hashemi and Mirzaei's study reported that writing journal entries was a difficult task and they did not feel ready for it (2015: 106). There were also those who said that the eagerness to write in their journal depended on their mood: sometimes they felt like it and sometimes not.

Why the students were planning to continue writing their journal entries

Enjoyment and pleasure from writing were the most frequent explanations provided by the students when asked why they were planning to continue keeping their journal. They often stated that writing their entries was simply pleasant, that it was a form of relaxation to them, and that it provided them with a moment only for themselves in their hectic lives.

Another popular reason provided by the students was that they perceived the journal as a form of a diary, which would give (or already gave) them an insight into what they experienced in the past. As they often wrote about their daily life, what happened, how they felt, they held the journal as something that would stay with them and remind them of the days long gone. Some of the students openly wrote that they liked coming back to their previous entries and reminding themselves of what happened at the beginning of the semester. This confirms what Spaventa (2000: 168) noticed, namely

There are many rewards about keeping a journal. In addition to the informal conversation that takes place in it between you and yourself and you and your instructor: when you have finished the course, you will have a record of what you read, what you experienced and what you thought about during that time.

The third most popular reason why the students would decide to continue writing in their journal was to develop their language and writing skills. They noticed that their vocabulary expanded; they learned how to build correct sentences; they started using punctuation more consciously. Of course, we cannot be sure that all of these aspects of their writing improved only thanks to writing in their journal. However, having to write a weekly journal entry provided the students with an opportunity to practise what they learned during other classes at the university.

Another reason popular among the students was that journal worked as detox for their mind. It helped them to clear their mind; it allowed to put their thoughts and emotions down on paper. It was especially important and relieving for them after difficult events in life, a tough week at the university etc. Some students saw the positive relationship between keeping their journal and improvement of their mood. They also said that the positive journal allowed them to see things they normally would not pay attention to. In this way, it was a form of mindfulness which they practiced unconsciously.

There were also students who said that journal writing helped them become more systematic in their writing; that it was a tool thanks to which they opened up (hence, it may be said that journal writing was a means of self-expression for them, as Rodliyah called it); they also reported they started thinking more in English.

Conclusion

The present study focused on the students' perception of the benefits of journal writing. It has shown that students' attitude towards this very activity influences their perception of how it may help them in developing their writing and language skills, in performing their final task, and in finding pleasure in the process of writing. It transpired that if the students understand the idea of journal writing, have positive attitude towards it and treat it as a platform which allows them to experiment with their ideas and language, they find it helpful in completing their final assignment and in developing their language skills. Also, they enjoy the very process of writing their journal entries, saying that it works as detox for their minds, that it improves their mood and that it helps them become more mindful. Most importantly, though, writing becomes an activity which the students perceive as pleasant. This means that thanks to journal writing the students' attitude and motivation towards the very skill of writing in English has the potential to change for the better. Apart from the reasons provided by the students, journal writing offers them extensive practice in writing in the English language, which in turn teaches the students to think in English, develops their fluency in writing, and is a perfect opportunity to put their knowledge into practice. Also, it allows the students to express their opinions in their journals and in this way be heard by their instructors, which is not always possible in the classroom.

For teachers, journal writing creates an opportunity to get to know their students better, to monitor their language skills, and provide personalized feedback.

As some students complained about journal writing, the lack of ideas for their entries and generally not having enough time to devote for this activity, it may be a good idea to do journal writing during the class, at least at the very beginning of the semester. In this way, our students will be granted time to write their entries. They will always be presented with a list of topics, which will minimize the risk of forgetting about the suggested writing prompts and having no topic to write about. The moment we feel that students have grasped the very idea of journal writing and that they feel confident about the content of their entries, journal may be assigned as an outside of class activity. It may also be an option, especially for those students who are not good at regular writing, to introduce an idea of one line journal. In this way the students will get used to writing regularly.

Bearing in mind those students who did not treat journal writing seriously, who did not believe that journal writing is beneficial and that it does not develop them, we should very carefully think about the way we introduce this element of our course. Always should we carefully explain what we mean by keeping a journal. It is also a good idea to read students' journals after they have written their first three entries. In such a way, we are still able to intervene and help them (if needed, of course) find another format for their entries early in the semester. We may also present the students with the results of studies which will show them the benefits of keeping a journal. In this way, the students may develop a more positive attitude towards journals and their doubts connected with keeping one may vanish at the very beginning of this writing practice.

Journal writing remains a valuable teaching and learning tool in many classrooms, because it not only teaches the students to write but also encourages them to share their experiences and ideas (Hashemi & Mirzaei, 2015: 104). Journal writing is a good way to begin implementing a writing workshop because "it promotes fluency in reading and writing and encourage risk taking, provides opportunities for reflection, and promotes the development of written language conventions" (Routman, 2000). Most importantly, though, journal writing seems to be a tool which offers potential to change the students' attitude towards writing. If journal writing is administered in a proper way, our students, just like the students in Tuan's study (2010), may admit that they would like to continue writing their journal after the end of the course and that they would like to have it incorporated as an element of all writing classes at the university.

In the end, it is worth mentioning that the present study, despite offering an interesting insight into the students' views on journal writing, is not free from its limitations. Only the students' perceptions of journal writing practice were investigated. It has not been verified whether the journals in fact resulted in developing students' language skills or helped them to find topics for their final assignment as all of the results are only based on the opinions of the students. It is difficult to state whether it was the journal which helped our students write better in English or whether the progress was made thanks to other activities (other classes at the university, extensive reading in English etc.). Hence, future studies should try to investigate the issue not only paying attention to students'

opinions, but focusing also on their written works and the progress they have made during the whole semester (as was done in a study by Kambara, 2020).

Concerning the direction in the future research within the issue of journal writing, it would be interesting to check whether the frequency and type of feedback provided by the teacher influences the students' perception of journal writing. On the basis of Tuan's study (2010), it is hypothesized that the more frequent the feedback, the more students feel that they develop their language and writing skills.

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Appendix 1. A Positive Journal

Guidelines:

- ✓ The journal should take the form of a notebook.
- ✓ Entries should be written in hand.
- ✓ Every entry should be at least one page long.
- ✓ Entries should be written once a week.
- ✓ You can always pick a question from the list below or decide on a topic of your own choice.
- ✓ Journals will not be checked for errors; what matters is the content.

Reflection questions

My favourite way to spend the day is...
The two moments that I will never forget are...
If I could talk to my teenage self, the one thing I would say is...
Make a list of 10 things that make you smile.
The words I would like to live by are...
I could not imagine living without...
When I am in pain – physical or emotional – the kindest thing I can do for myself is...
I really wish others knew it about me...

Name what is enough for you.

If my body could talk, it would say...

What do you love about life?

What always brings tears to your eyes?

Using 10 words, describe yourself.

What has surprised you the most about your life or life in general?

What can you learn from your biggest mistakes?

I feel more energized when...

Write a list of questions to which you urgently need answers.

Make a list of everything that inspires you – books, websites, quotes, people, paintings, stores, stars in the sky...

I feel happiest in my skin when...

Make a list of everything you would like to say no to.

Make a list of everything you would like to say yes to.

Appendix 2. Ankieta podsumowująca zajęcia z Pisania kreatywnego (semestr zimowy)

Styczeń 2022

Poniższa ankieta ma na celu zebranie opinii dotyczących zajęć z Pisania kreatywnego. Państwa odpowiedzi będą miały wpływ na ewentualne zmiany w sposobie projektowania oraz prowadzenia kursu w semestrze letnim.

Bardzo proszę o udzielanie szczerych odpowiedzi. W innym wypadku ankieta nie spełni swojego zadania.

Z góry dziękuję za wypełnienie ankiety!

Ola Majchrzak

Pytanie 1

Które elementy kursu okazały się najbardziej POMOCNE w napisaniu finalnej autobiografii? Skorzystaj ze skali od 1 do 5, gdzie 1 to najniższa ocena, a 5 najwyższa.

autorskie materiały wprowadzające w rodzaju autobiografii (autobiography as a personal story, autobiography as a journal etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
oryginalne teksty – książki, opowiadania, piosenki (np. C.V. Kinga, <i>What I talk about...</i> Murakamiego, <i>Dziennik Bridget Jones</i> etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
studenckie autobiografie (<i>The loss, My COVID diary, Four dots</i> etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
nasze spotkania (w uczelni, webinary)	1	2	3	4	5
zadania do wykonania na forum (komentarz dotyczący Kinga, temat autobiografii)	1	2	3	4	5
materiały i ćwiczenia na interpunkcję (np. sentence fragments, comma splice, fanboys i wabbits)	1	2	3	4	5
peer review session (ostatnie zajęcia)	1	2	3	4	5
informacja zwrotna od dydaktyka (pod zadaniami na forum)	1	2	3	4	5
prowadzenie dziennika	1	2	3	4	5

Pytanie 2

Które elementy kursu sprawiły Ci największą PRZYJEMNOŚĆ? Skorzystaj ze skali od 1 do 5, gdzie 1 to najniższa ocena, a 5 najwyższa.

autorskie materiały wprowadzające w rodzaju autobiografii (autobiography as a personal story, autobiography as a journal etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
oryginalne teksty – książki, opowiadania, piosenki (np. C.V. Kinga, <i>What I talk about...</i> Murakamiego, <i>Dziennik Bridget Jones</i> etc.)	1	2	3	4	5

studenckie autobiografie (<i>The loss, My COVID diary, Four dots</i> etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
nasze spotkania (w uczelni, webinarzy)	1	2	3	4	5
zadania do wykonania na forum (komentarz dotyczący Kinga, temat autobiografii)	1	2	3	4	5
materiały i ćwiczenia na interpunkcję (np. sentence fragments, comma splice, fanboys i wabbits)	1	2	3	4	5
peer review session (ostatnie zajęcia)	1	2	3	4	5
informacja zwrotna od dydaktyka (pod zadaniami na forum)	1	2	3	4	5
prowadzenie dziennika	1	2	3	4	5
finalne zadanie (autobiografia)	1	2	3	4	5
zajęcia na spacerze (pisanie refleksyjnego wpisu dziennikowego w parku)	1	2	3	4	5

Pytanie 3

Które elementy kursu pozwoliły Ci najbardziej ROZWINĄĆ SIĘ JĘZYKOWO? Skorzystaj ze skali od 1 do 5, gdzie 1 to najniższa ocena, a 5 najwyższa.

autorskie materiały wprowadzające w rodzaju autobiografii (autobiography as a personal story, autobiography as a journal etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
oryginalne teksty – książki, opowiadania, piosenki (np. <i>C.V. Kinga, What I talk about...</i> Murakamiego, <i>Dziennik Bridget Jones</i> etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
studenckie autobiografie (<i>The loss, My COVID diary, Four dots</i> etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
webinarzy	1	2	3	4	5
zadania do wykonania na forum (komentarz dotyczący Kinga, temat autobiografii)	1	2	3	4	5
materiały i ćwiczenia na interpunkcję (np. sentence fragments, comma splice)	1	2	3	4	5
peer review session (ostatnie zajęcia)	1	2	3	4	5
informacja zwrotna od dydaktyka (pod zadaniami na forum)	1	2	3	4	5
prowadzenie dziennika	1	2	3	4	5
finalne zadanie (autobiografia)	1	2	3	4	5
zajęcia na spacerze (pisanie refleksyjnego wpisu dziennikowego w parku)	1	2	3	4	5

Pytanie 4

Czy pisząc dziennik, korzystałeś z listy tematów zaproponowanych na początku kursu oraz w grudniu na platformie? Dlaczego?

.....

Pytanie 5

Czy planujesz kontynuować prowadzenie dziennika w przyszłym semestrze? Dlaczego?

.....

Pytanie 6

Co Ci się najbardziej podobało w kursie?

.....

Pytanie 7

Czy jest coś, co sprawiłoby, że kurs byłby pełniejszy, skuteczniejszy? Być może czegoś zabrakło? Jeśli tak, to czego?

.....

Pytanie 8

Jak oceniasz kurs pisania kreatywnego (semestr zimowy) w skali od 1 do 5 (gdzie 1 to najniższa ocena, a 5 najwyższa)?

1	2	3	4	5
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Pytanie 9

Podsumowując – co dał Ci ten kurs? Jak Cię rozwinął?

.....

Bardzo dziękuję za szczerze odpowiedzi!

Streszczenie

Dziennik – perspektywa uczących się języka angielskiego jako obcego

Rozwijanie umiejętności pisania w języku obcym wiąże się z wieloma wyzwaniami. Pisanie postrzegane jest jako czasochłonne, trudne, nudne, ograniczające i niesatysfakcjonujące, co powoduje, że uczniowie mają negatywny stosunek do pisania, zarówno w języku ojczystym, jak i obcym. Prowadzenie dziennika to narzędzie, które pomaga rozwijać umiejętności językowe oraz pisania w języku obcym, wyrabiać regularny nawyk pisania, a jednocześnie daje przestrzeń do wyrażenia siebie. Niniejsze badanie miało na celu ustalenie, jak uczący się języka angielskiego jako obcego postrzegają pisanie dziennika. Uczestnikami badania było 55 studentów pierwszego roku filologii angielskiej, którzy wzięli udział w kursie kreatywnego pisania. Badanie pokazało, że pisanie dziennika jest dla studentów przyjemne, pomogło im w napisaniu końcowego zadania, czyli autobiografii, i w rozwinięciu umiejętności językowych. Badanie wykazało również, że zaproponowanie uczniom tematów/pytań do ich wpisów dziennikowych może być przydatne w trakcie pisania dziennika, zwłaszcza dla tych osób, które nie mają pomysłów na swoje wpisy. Artykuł kończą rekomendacje dotyczące włączania dzienników do zajęć językowych.

Słowa kluczowe: dziennik, prowadzenie dziennika, kurs kreatywnego pisania, rozwijanie umiejętności językowych oraz pisania w języku obcym