

## LEARNING LOG: A POWERFUL TOOL TO ENHANCE WRITING SKILL

Amirah Akhyar  
[amanidahaman@ipda.edu.my](mailto:amanidahaman@ipda.edu.my)

### ABSTRACT

This classroom practice aims to explore the effectiveness of using learning logs in enhancing students' writing skill. Many researchers have proven the effectiveness of learning logs in improving students' writing skill. This classroom practice employs the use of learning log for every four-week period, with a class of 8-year old pupils. Every four weeks teacher dedicates time for the pupils to share and discuss their learning logs with one another in class. The pupils can write words, phrases or sentences, draw pictures, add labels and captions, stick in pictures, type on the computer and stick the results in, add speech bubbles, post-it notes and etc. The use of learning logs is also very much in tune with the CEFR's philosophy in which it promotes formative assessment during teaching and learning activities. Teachers can make use of the learning logs to assess and deliver descriptive feedback on what the pupils are doing well and suggestion for improvement. After few months of practising learning logs in the classroom, the pupils become more motivated to write more sentences to express their idea. They also become more aware of the learning process and able to add personal connections to the topic. Overall, with simple instruction and jump-start questions, a simple sheet like the learning log help to improve students' writing fluency and at the same time it also helps to create a thoughtful classroom.

**Keyword:** *learning log, writing skill, formative assessment*

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

A mastery of English is important to students' learning and lifelong careers. Glazier (1994:3) pointed out that "being able to write in English is essential in college, and it probably will be an asset in your career". One of the most difficult things in language is to produce a piece of writing which is coherent, fluent and well extended (Nunan, 1999).

Primary students in my school especially Level 1 students do not have a strong English learning atmosphere and rarely use the language in their daily life. They lack the motivation to use it in writing and speaking and do not read a lot of related reading materials. Even when they are assigned a writing task, most of them are apathetic as "the nature of writing itself is not interesting enough to motivate English learners to practice regularly" (Hedge, 1991: 6). They may find the tasks irrelevant and are short of ideas because they are "obliged to write" (Byrne, 1991:5). As argued by Mlynarczyk (1998), too much attention is given to the correctness of grammar and this might become an obstacle of the development of fluency.

Practice however makes perfect. Writing a learning log can be an empowering tool by providing a relaxed and enjoyable platform for students to express themselves. Peyton and Reed (1990) are in support of this kind of journal writing as students are encouraged to share and express creatively. The present study tries to find out whether it would raise students'

motivation in English learning. The aim is to enhance their language skills through regular journal writing when given appropriate guidance and support. In this paper, learning logs and journal writing are interchangeably used.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

One effective way for enhancing competence is the increase the opportunities to write. Writing outside the classroom can be a useful tool to improve communication skills (Chanderasegaran, 2002: 14). Casanave (2011) argued that practising writing skills regularly would inevitably lead to improvements although its exact nature is often difficult to predict. Many scholars (Peyton, 1990; Peyton & Reed, 1990; Cowgreeler, 2010; Holmes & Moulton, 1997) considered the writing of dialogues as one of the useful practices. Journals writing and learning logs are “notebooks in which writers keep a record of ideas, opinions, and description of daily life and help writers develop their creativity” (Spaventa, 2000: 168). In the present study, journal writing is regarded as “communication and language practice” as defined by Peyton and Reed (1990). It helps learners communicate better by giving them more chances to express freely about what they want to. Dialogue writing specifically refers to a regular and continuous private conversation between a teacher and a student. Hamp and Heasley (2006: 5) has stated the benefit of journal writing as follows:

*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.*

Keeping a learning log therefore enables students to write something about themselves regularly so that they can keep it as a habit. Charles (2005) pointed out that the main objective of the Journal Writing Scheme was to help students build a positive English writing attitude, increase their interest and therefore improve their learning attitude. The aim of writing a journal is “to encourage students to become involved and interested in writing” (White and Arndt, 1991: 63) rather than focus on mistakes and time pressure (Spaventa, 2000: 168). Scholars found positive connections between regular writing and the development of fluency (Holmes & Moulton, 1997; Piazza, 2003; Cowler, 2010; Peyton & Reed, 1990; Peyton, 1990; Casanave, 2011; Liao & Wong, 2007; Mlynarczyk, 1998). Casanave (2011) illustrated that students could write more if they do not mind making mistakes once they started writing (p. 46):

*Increases in fluency can be interpreted in many ways such as writing more in less time with no discernible lessening of quality; that they are taking more risks and so making more mistakes; or that they are rushing through the writing task because it is no longer novel and because their attention is focused elsewhere, resulting in fast but possibly sloppy writing.*

White and Arndt (1991) added that journal writing (p. 67) “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”.

Keeping a learning log can also help students develop greater awareness of their own experience and interpersonal relationship as well as establish rapport with their teachers

through informal conversation. Teachers can create a supportive atmosphere for arousing high learning motivation which students could integrate more and more into their formal writing (Ngho, 2002: 27). As noted by Casanave (2011) and Peyton and Reed (1990), journal writing can improve competence across all age levels. Lagan (2000: 14) also argues that journal writing could show "how ideas can be discovered in the process of writing". After all, many scholars are in support of journal writing as an effective means for generating ideas and encouraging accurate expression. "Creative writing activities can change students' perceptions not merely on writing but also on themselves and the world they live in, lower anxiety, and develop their writing proficiency, accuracy and personalities" (Tin, 2004: 6).

Researchers also suggested that students need not focus too much on mistakes in their learning logs. White and Arndt (1991: 172) recommended the ways below for the handling of errors. 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. Several points should be kept in mind when we:*

- *concentrate on language errors which have global rather than local effects. This means attending to formal language errors which interfere with meaning over a broader span than the individual clause or sentence*

- *attempt to cover too many repairs. It is quite impossible for learners to cope with too many problems simultaneously*

### 3.0 METHODOLOGY

This classroom practice employed the use of learning log for every four-week. The subjects were 45 students from Year 2 Intelek, a mixed-ability classroom. They were 8 years old and their English proficiency range from low to average. Most of them could write simple English although their ideas were often limited. Some of them were unwilling to write because of their lack of ideas and vocabulary and poor grammatical accuracy. The students were introduced with two types of learning logs; the structured type and the free style. Students with low proficiency used the structured while the proficient students used the free-style type.

Students were awarded stickers after finishing each learning log and completing the correction exercises afterwards. To enhance relationships with students, praise, encouragement and experience sharing were given according to their writing quality.

Learning log should be a regular and compulsory activity if it is to be effective for developing into a habit. Every student here was therefore asked to write learning logs from January to Oktober regularly at the rate of one piece per month. Emphasis was placed on the interaction between teacher and students and the sharing of ideas rather than language accuracy. This classroom practice helped students understand more about their self-confidence in using English as well as their self-motivation, seriousness and eagerness towards learning log.

## 4.0 RESULT

The first three months was challenging as some of the students considered writing a tough task and were not willing to write a tough task. They treated learning logs as a piece of homework and art activity. Moreover, students might not have proof-read their work after writing each time. All these anecdotes showed that learning log would be a difficult task to commence. Fortunately, more than half of them were willing to write seriously. After being briefed about the benefits and objectives of the learning log activity, they became more willing to write and could meet the length requirement. After learning about learning log structure and content, they could create their own ideas and organised their writings well. Students were expected to write only once each month. However, they had found it difficult to finish their writing task on time. However, with the cooperation of students, ten pieces of learning logs were completed together. This certainly provided a valuable opportunity for practice.

Writing fluency is reflected by lexicized ways of communication (Skehan, 1996: 22) and speed, i.e. the number of words written within a limited length of time. The students' writing speed has become faster and the impact on learning log on writing fluency was positive. Students' learning logs had also improved in terms of number of words, accuracy, the use of vocabulary and the variety of the sentence patterns. Students however could write much more afterwards. In terms of accuracy, a number of mistakes were made but richer contents were found in their learning logs. Similar improvements can be found in the learning log written by lower-ability students with the average number of words increased. The content of the journals also became richer because students were more willing to share their feelings and describe in detail. Though the writing was still quite Manglish in nature, there were fewer spelling mistakes while more compound sentences and simple sentence structures were used.

Most of the students could not do any error correction exercises by themselves. The teacher only highlighted common errors such as the inappropriate use of tenses, wrong choice of words and direct translation from Malay into English. A well-structured, tailor-made teaching plan should be developed to integrate the learning log with the formal curriculum. With authentic communicative experience and under non-threatening situations, students could overcome their fear of writing. Half of the students submitted their first four pieces of learning logs on time. About 5 out of 45 students submitted their learning logs more than two days after the deadline. Nevertheless, starting from the fifth piece onwards most of them could hand in their learning logs on time. Overall speaking, students had shown higher intrinsic motivation toward the writing of journals.

Learning log could improve students' length of writing and richness of content. Most of them just wrote about one page of A4 from January until March. At first most of the students used short sentences to express their feelings or describe just one or two incidents on a day. Now they could describe their events in greater detail and with more compound sentences. Letting students personalise their own journal covers can help them build up their sense of ownership and thereby foster their interest in writing. Some of them drew very well. For those who were not good at drawing, they could cut their favourite pictures from the magazines or newspapers. Thus, all the students could design their own favourite covers and reflected that they liked such an idea.

A sense of ownership has been built when students were asked to design their own learning log. The teacher kept their learning logs in good condition till the end of the academic year. Building a sense of ownership in this way was useful in enhancing the intrinsic learning motivation of students. Positive enforcements such as giving out stickers for the submission of learning logs also helped to motivate students and led to improvements in their academic work (Alberto & Troutman, 2006). Students liked this kind of reward a lot as reflected in their

learning logs. They felt a sense of pride, achievement and recognition and put more effort onto learning log. The most hard-working students obtained a line of ten stickers on their learning logs.

## **5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

This study aims at finding out whether learning logs would raise students' motivation in English learning and thereby enhance their writing skills. The result revealed that it helped to improve the fluency and accuracy of writing as well as to promote enjoyment and positive attitude towards writing. Providing framed topics, letting students personalize their own learning logs, setting error correction exercises, giving stickers as rewards, giving detailed feedback and building good inter-personal relationships all appear to be effective means in this connection. All these measures should be continued and refined in the future implementation of a similar writing scheme. The majority of students acknowledged that writing a learning log could build up rapport with their teacher. Learning log therefore can be regarded as an effective means to give them support and care. Detailed and sincere feedback meanwhile could encourage students to write more. A larger scale study should be conducted should be conducted next year with more classes so that the representativeness of the findings can be improved. The perspectives of other teachers may also be considered for further study although it is always important to 'start small'.

Further improvements in research can be achieved if the study is conducted in a longer period of time in a spiral model (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000). A 2-3 years plan for instance can allow phenomena to be analysed at greater depth. Curriculum and pedagogical measures for integrating learning log with the English Language curriculum, could be formulated and evaluated continuously and regularly. More sample of learning logs can be collected and students can have more writing practices in a longer period of time. In addition, other means of data collection such as interviews and analysis of students' journals may be adopted. A clearer picture of how learning logs can help to enhance students' English proficiency can be attained as a result

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