

Assessing EFL Student Teachers' Writing Skills through Reflective Journal

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Abstract

Writing has been claimed to be the last and hardest language skill to be learned by language learners, either native speakers of the language or foreign/second language learners. Within this respect, writing becomes a serious challenge for many EFL students to master their target language. EFL students use reflective journals as learning logs to express or capture their ideas to produce logical and meaningful writing. This study tried to investigate the EFL student teachers' writing skill through their reflective journal written through Micro Teaching course in English Education program. Their writing skills were examined in terms of content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics applying the framework of Jacobs' et al, (1981). The study used descriptive method to examine the EFL students' writing skill through their reflective journals. The research findings showed that the EFL students' writing skills through their reflective journal in micro teaching course were at good level. The data analysis also indicated that the EFL students performed the best in mechanics aspect and the lowest in vocabulary aspect.

Keywords: Journal writing, reflective journal, writing skill, EFL students

INTRODUCTION

Finkle as quoted by Watson (2010:2) argued that the most effective ways to reflect on experience is by writing. Writing facilitates learners to express their ideas and feelings as well as clarify and stimulate the mind. According to Hamp and Heasley (2006: 2) stated that writing skill is often recognized as the last language ability to be learned for native speakers of the language as well as for foreign/second language learners among the four main language skills in the language acquisition process. Similarly, being able to write in English is necessary for college student instructors, and it will most likely be an asset in their teaching profession (Glazier) (1994:3). However, many EFL students tend to struggle with English writing (Harmer, 1992: 53). Nunan (1999) feels that producing a clear, fluent, extended writing piece is the most difficult thing in language since the reader must grasp what has been said without asking for clarification or relying on the writer's tone of voice or body language.

Reflective journal writing has long been utilized in pedagogy to increase students' learning attitudes, creativity, and academic awareness. Two basic concepts underpin this hands-on requirement for reflective diary writing. First, EFL university students are urged to maintain writing competency, which involves the ability to compose texts, explain linguistically or culturally enriched writing frameworks, and recognize thematic subjects (McIntosh et al., 2017). Second, reflective journal writing helps students develop their self-awareness, knowledge of difficulties, and reasoning abilities (Abednia et al., 2013). This is to state that reflective journal writing is becoming more popular as a method of addressing both writing competence and its substantial effects on cognitive domains such as powerful reflections, interpretation, and other self-inquiry difficulties.

According to Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman (2018), every practice of journal writing reflectively in EFL contexts requires a pedagogical approach used by lecturers to embody teaching attitudes and teaching awareness. Similarly, McIntosh et al., (2017) put forward that writing reflective journal necessitates other generally accepted writing norms. As a result, in order to help their students, become more competent and qualified in writing logical, reflective, and critical ideas as prospective teachers, educators must not only integrate teaching attitudes and awareness into their classes, but also familiarize them with established writing norms. Reflective journal writing, from this perspective, can stimulate reflections and allow students to use background resources relevant to their own learning experiences (Hashemi & Mirzaei, 2015). They have a decent possibility of gaining self-awareness and developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills as crucial twenty-first-century skills if they keep reflective diaries in their academic courses.

It is not enough to just have experience in order to learn. Without reflecting on the experience, it is possible that it will be forgotten or that its learning potential will be lost. Generalizations or conceptions might be developed from the feelings and thoughts that emerge from this reflection. And it is generalizations that allow new situations to be appropriately dealt with (Gibbs 1988). Reflection, and more specifically reflective writing, necessitates learners reflecting on their own works in order to learn from them. By documenting contemplation, students can have a useful record of their own thoughts that they can return to time and again, and the act of writing fosters a deeper level of thought.

Some EFL learners have gotten little instruction in writing reflectively, which accounts for a substantial amount of their performance in writing skills when it comes to Second Language Acquisition (SLA). As a result, the current study intends to investigate the effects of reflective writing on the writing performance of Iranian EFL learners and to demonstrate the positive function of reflective writing in promoting these two. As a result, this research can play an important role in assisting EFL learners to learn English more effectively, and it will contribute to the increasing body of research in the subject.

By considering the ideas stated above, the use of reflective journal can be the best choice in seeing the students' skill in writing thoroughly. First, by writing reflective journal, the students will not feel the tension as if it is something that needs to be careful of its own standards when the topic is decided by the teacher. But to write the reflective journal the students do not have to be worried about the standards required for the writing since journal content depended on the real time experience of the writer. Similarly, students do not have to struggle with finding and constructing unknown ideas because the journal only requires existing ideas from self-experience while attending lectures. Finally, students do not have to be concerned about time because the

journal can only be made after experiencing the learning activities and the writing process will be finished in no time and even the time can be up to one week when it comes to the weekly reflective journal.

Based on the statement above, the researcher feels interested and sees the need to conduct research to explore students' writing skills through reflective journals. The research was, therefore, guided by the research question as follow: "How is the EFL students' English skill reflected in reflective journals written in Micro Teaching courses?"

METHOD

This study used quantitative and qualitative research method to assess the EFL student teachers' writing skills through their reflective journals written in Micro Teaching course. Three instruments were used to collect the research data: a) document, b) observation, and c) interview. Documents represent reflective journals written by the EFL students every week during the first half of the semester and submitted online via Syam-Ok. Observation activities are carried out during the teaching-learning process or lectures take place. Observations were made to collect data on the implementation of lectures whose processes and content were written by students participating in the courses in the form of a reflection journal. Interview was conducted online with the help of google form. Here, the list of interview questions was written in google form whose link was then sent to the research subject. 28 students from a class of Micro Teaching course at English Education Program at the Faculty of Language and Literature of the State University of Makassar (Universitas Negeri Makassar) were being the participants in the study. Research data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Data on the writing score derived from Jacobs' et al rubric were analyzed using simple statistics to see the mean score. In order to determine the degree of the EFL students' writing skill, the scoring guideline standard from Kemdikbud was applied whose scale range was presented below.

Table 1. Scoring Guideline Standard Form

SCALE	CATEGORY
< 60	Poor
60 – 73	Fair
74 – 87	Good
88 – 100	Excellent

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The present study tried to examine the EFL student teachers' writing skill through reflective journals they wrote during the first half of the semester they participated in Micro Teaching course at English Education Study Program Universitas Negeri Makassar. Their reflective journals were analyzed and scored by applying the framework of Jacobs' et al (1981) and the results were presented in the following table.

Table 2. The EFL Students' Reflective Journal Writing Score

No	Participants' Initials	Writing Score per Component					Total
		Content (30)	Organization (20)	Vocabulary (20)	Grammar (25)	Mechanics (5)	
1	KR	29	19	18	24	5	95
2	AP	28	17	18	23	4	90
3	AK	22	16	12	16	3	77
4	PM	26	16	15	21	4	82
5	PU	24	15	14	18	3	74
6	W	28	16	14	22	4	84
7	A	23	16	13	18	3	73
8	HAH	27	15	14	21	4	81
9	NW	27	18	15	22	4	86
10	NHA	28	17	14	24	4	87
11	NWD	29	19	19	24	5	96
12	NYH	27	16	15	23	4	85
13	INAA	24	16	15	19	4	78
14	SL	30	20	19	24	5	98
15	SRR	27	18	14	23	4	86
16	SN	30	20	20	25	5	100
17	SM	26	17	15	20	4	82
18	RYS	24	16	14	18	3	75
19	RAM	26	17	15	18	4	80
20	RNN	28	17	14	24	4	87
21	NSA	27	16	13	24	4	84
22	NR	28	18	14	24	4	88
23	NAP	27	18	14	23	4	86
24	MSS	26	18	15	21	4	84
25	KS	27	15	14	21	4	81
26	IHR	27	17	14	23	4	85
27	FF	30	20	18	25	5	98
28	AFRM	30	18	18	24	5	95
MEAN		27	17	15	22	4	85.6

Table 2 above showed the writing score of every individual from the five components of writing rubric. Based on the scoring guideline standard prepared by the Ministry of Education and Culture, 8 students were at excellent category, 19 students were at good category, 1 was at fair category, and none at poor category. Similarly, the table above also revealed that the mean score of the students' writing performance was 85.6. This is to say, the EFL students' writing performance generally fall into good category.

In terms of the five writing components, the table revealed that the average score of content was 27, organization 17, vocabulary 15, language use or grammar 22 and mechanics 4. There are several components that should be emphasized in writing assessment such as content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics as mentioned in the writing ability rubric

score by Jacobs et al (1981). Each category has a different maximum score. Content is given the maximum score 30, if the students are able to write very well, it means that their writing has excellent support and match the purpose of the text. Organization is given 20 if the writing is well organized, the topic sentence is clear, cohesive and coherence. While the aspect of vocabulary also has a maximum score of 20 if the writer uses effective word form. Moreover, the grammar aspect is given 25 if the writing presents correct grammar. The last aspect is mechanics which is given score 5 if the writing has good essay format and good use of capitalization, punctuation and spelling. Therefore, the total score for those categories is 100. Among these five writing components reflected in the EFL students' journal writing presented in the table above, it is clear that the students performed the best in mechanics and the least in vocabulary whereas they performed good in the other three components namely content, organization, and grammar.

Table 3. Students' Responses from online Interview

Benefits of Writing Reflective Journal	Challenges of Writing Reflective Journal
It helps to develop critical thinking skills	It takes times to practice writing every week
It helps to review the learning materials learned	It needs clear instruction and feedback from the lecturer
It contributes to deepen understanding and knowledge	
It trains to practice self-reflection	
It guides us to think about future professional development	

Table 3 above portrayed the responses of the EFL students towards the interview questions given to them through google form. The respondents thought that writing reflective journals contributes to their critical thinking skills. By writing reflective journals, they became familiar with evaluate their thinking and criticize their ideas written within their journals. Similarly, writing reflective journals helps them to review the materials they have already learned each week and deepen their understanding. Likewise, reflective journals writing provides them with good practice for self-reflection. By writing reflective journals, they understand their strengths and weakness and devise ways to improve them. Writing reflective journals also provides them with prospective thinking toward their future professional career development. However, the EFL students pinpointed some challenges they encounter in writing their reflective journals. First, they assumed that writing reflective journals each takes time and tends to be such a burden for them. Second, they did not experience the most advantage when their lecturer did not check all their journal writing and provide them with corrective feedback.

CONCLUSIONS

Writing reflective journals for the EFL student teachers provided them with rather new experience to review their learning materials, evaluate their thinking and knowledge. Reflective journal writing introduced them to do reflections and allow them to use background materials relevant to their individual learning experiences (Hashemi & Mirzaei, 2015). With reflective journals in their academic courses, they stand a good chance to gain self-knowledge, and develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills as important part of the twenty-first century skills.

The EFL student teachers' writing skill based on the assessment toward reflective journals they made was classified into good category, and among the five component of writing rubric, the EFL student teachers showed their best performance in mechanics and the least in vocabulary. This infers that they still necessitate to have more practice writing and improve their performance in terms of vocabulary acquisition and development as the main priority followed by their ability to present their writing with correct grammar as well as the ability to write well with excellent support and details. Besides, they also need to be well organized and clear, cohesive and coherent sentences. This also implies that the lecturers require to integrate reflective journals in their courses to familiarize them to write logically and reflect critically.

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