

# **Journal Writing : Language Activity and Teaching/Learning Evaluation**

**Jiraporn Dhanarattigannon**

"Journal writing" this term came to mind when I took a short course on testing at RELC in Singapore. During the course, participants were asked to write a 'reflective journal' as feedback to the lecturers and for the RELC itself. I found that the purpose of writing this reflective journal which shares the same umbrella with journal writing was in some ways similar to and in others different from what I had experienced. Therefore, in the present paper, I would like to share the idea about journal writing as a language learning activity for writing as well as teaching/learning evaluation, based on my own teaching experience and on what I have gained from the testing course at RELC in Singapore on 11 to 30 September 1995. The first part will give definition of journal writing. The second part will discuss about the application of a journal in terms of a tool for language instruction to develop writing skills, and for learner's and teacher's evaluation. In addition, some examples of journal entries will be given.

## **What is a journal writing?**

According to Richards (1992 : 10-11), journal or diary-writing is a procedure which is used as a tool for developing critical reflection, in order to develop effective teaching. The account is referred to as a record, reflecting the teacher's performance and including straightforward descriptions of events. Journal writing is proposed as a means to measure the teaching method employed in class, to see how well he or she performs. In this sense, journal writing can be a self-report or peer observation.

In this article, a journal, as well as a reflective journal, is an account that a student writes about whatever he/she wants to such as something interesting, his/her experience, impressive events, and his/her reaction to what he/she read or what he/she

has learned in class. Moreover, a journal is also referred to as a critical report which teachers write regarding class activities or events, including teaching methods.

## **Applications of Journal Writing**

### **I. Journal writing as a learner's activity for developing writing skill.**

In foreign language situations, such as we have in Thailand, writing seems to be one of the most difficult skills to develop. This may be because Thai and English compositions have different styles and organisations, and it's quite hard for Thai students to express their ideas in writing. In other words, Thai students tend to think in Thai and then translate to English.

Journal writing can be used to help the students express their ideas freely. During my time as a teacher at Srinakharinwirot University at Bangsaen, the students taking Writing I were encouraged to write journal entries in English twice a week. This was to be the first step in writing and was intended to encourage the students to express their own thoughts freely and make them feel at ease with the free writing.

### **Method**

The idea of journal writing proposed by Saipin Numbenchaphon in her book (Saipin Numbenchaphon, 1989 : 4-12), that I used as a writing material was that the students would choose what to write. Their topics could be a story of their experience, an impressive event, their reaction to what they had read or whatever they wanted to tell to the teacher about. The teacher (I) would not focus on the grammar, mechanics, or accuracy, but on presenting their idea or feeling freely.

At first, the students may feel uncomfortable about writing or expressing their ideas, so the teacher may have to encourage them to write what they know or think and not to worry about the organisation, accuracy or length of the account. After two or three weeks or at the end of the course, I found that the students felt more relaxed in writing their stories. Here are some examples of journals made by students taking Writing I at Srinakharinwirot University, Bangsaen Campus (Saipin Numbenchaphon, 1989 : 6-7, 10-11).

### **First journal : Monday, June 20, 1988**

Today, I just start to write journal. So I don't know that how I should write. After I learned Writing I, I went to volunteer group for talk with my friends. Today I got to learn painting with Ajarn Chamni. I felt happy when I could do something that I like, although, I didn't have experience about art. My art work still bad, but Ajarn Chamni said to me that nevermind. That word made me well. After that I learned Educational Measurement, but Ajarn Kanjana Maneesong taught only 1 hour. Beside learned this subject everybody must went to help Ajarn Kanjana remove the chairs at Technology building by had condition, that after it was finished everybody could sign their name. After finished learning I went to eat and meeting with my friends.

### **Last journal : Wednesday, August 31, 1988**

Today is the last day for writing journal. I think that it must make me feel strange because I used to write it before I went to bed. Writing journal is both goodness and badness for me. At first, I wrote the journal with unknowledge. I usually write many wrong words, grammartics and etc. I might write it like daily because I hardly understood writing journal. I attempt to write it as well as I could. Although sometime, I would like to write everything that I think, but I can't write all thing. I feel serious if I couldn't write journal better than at first that I had wrote. Someday, I could write in a long paragraph. It helped me to develop with Oral II subject because I began to improve my English in writing. Sometime I think that this journal isn't useful for me because I usually write repeatedly sentences of eachday. Writing journal for me, I use to write for a long time and I attend to write. Although my letters or my dirty writing was make my teacher felt uneasy, but I had attempt to develop as goods I could. I think that I will write journal in my daily book after writing to send the teacher, because it is useful more than unuseful.

(Written by Busarin Sawangkaew)

**Wednesday, August 31, 1988**

This is not the last day for writing journals, but surely this is the last day for writing them in this course. I learned a lot from it, how to maintain my memories or my ideas in each day; how can I explain my thoughts and how to pick ideas up clearly, Writing journals is one of the best ways to practice daily English. It's worth for me to waste my time for doing this practice. The disadvantage is only wasting time but it's weaker when compare with the advantages I gained. For me, when I have ideas or I had seen some interesting points, I could write journals well, but if I had bare brain, it's hard for me to write. All that happened to me are ordinary reactions everyone have them. Writing a lot of journals make me write fluently when I want to express my feelings in English and makes me know my mistakes. I can improve my writing from doing it. I can see many advantages in writing journals. If I think, journals are not my homework, I'll never get bored with them, Thinking I want to write them myself makes no serious conditions for me. Writing journal is appropriate for students in writing courses.

(Written by Pongsathorn Wangchai)

## **Teacher's role**

What I would like to suggest here is about the teacher's response or how to check the students' journals. What the teacher should do is not to correct the students' essays but to respond to their idea or answer their questions, if they have any. For example, what I did when checking the journals was that I responded to their ideas. For example, when my student wrote something to show that he/she was worried about writing (like Busarin's), I told him/her not to worry and also encouraged him/her to try harder. Moreover, sometimes I gave him/her advice if he/she asked for it. This can be a means of interaction between the students and the teacher as well.

## **Result**

From the students' comments during discussion in small groups with the teacher about their writing (both their journal entries and compositions assigned during the course),

it was found that after writing the journals, the students were not afraid to express how they felt, or what they thought or knew by writing a paragraph anymore. They also felt at ease in writing a story about themselves. This experience confirms the idea that journal writing, as I mentioned above, can be used as a technique to encourage the students to get started in writing and to express their ideas freely as well as to develop their writing skills when they are learning how to write a good essay in class.

## **II. (Reflective) journal writing as a tool for student and teacher evaluation.**

Besides using journal writing to practice writing, after attending the short course at RELC in Singapore on language testing, I got the idea that the reflective journal can also be used as a tool to evaluate the student's ability in writing. In other words, the teacher can evaluate the writing ability of each student by checking how much progress he/she made in writing his/her journals during the course. This may be a part of a course evaluation.

Moreover, while attending the testing course at RELC in Singapore, the participants were asked to write reflective journals with the following objectives:

- to clarify their understanding of the course materials so that they could seek clarification through discussion with lecturers and fellow participants.
- to reflect on questions posed by the lecturers and record their own responses to issues of language testing.
- to relate the course objectives and content to their work.
- to provide feedback to the lecturers and the RELC.

(RELC course description, 1995)

## **Method**

According to the objectives stated above, it seemed to me that the main purpose of the reflective journal was to ask the participants to give their feedback or reflection on the course itself, the materials provided and the lecturers. For example, the participants could express what they thought about the lecture, the materials and the class atmosphere, including the lecturers. Furthermore, they could state how well they understood the lecture or materials assigned (See the example of my own journals in the appendix)

## Result

For this technique, it is found that the reflective journal can be a tool for the students and the teacher to evaluate the students, in terms of their understanding of the lectures and the materials presented through their own reports, as I did when I took the course at RELC (See the first example of my own journal in the appendix) I had a chance to discuss my understanding with the lecturer using the journal as a guide to discussion. Besides, this reflective journal can be used to evaluate the teacher's performance, as proposed by Richards (1992) in his article. (Reflective Teaching in TESOL Teacher Education).

The advantages of reflective journal writing in terms of evaluation are as follows.

1. From my point of view, the students can evaluate their own understanding and express it to the teacher in writing. Moreover, if they have more time, the teacher can discuss any problems if the students have, or explain more about what the students don't understand. In my experience, this method can help the students to solve problems in learning language as well. For example, in one of my own journals I wrote the questions that I had in mind about what I had learned in class and discussed these with the lecturer after they had read my journal. This made me understand the lesson more clearly.

2. The teacher gets feedback from the students which may help him/her develop teaching methods and assess his/her performance better, since as students are the target group in teaching/learning process, their comments act as a good mirror for the teacher. What I do to evaluate my course (Technical English) at the end of the course seems to share the idea of the reflective journal: that is, I ask my students to write comment about the course, such as the what they think about course, including the materials provided, the teacher (me) and the method used. These comments help me improve my course, especially my own performance in class. Besides, the teachers themselves can write their own journals to evaluate themselves about what they perform in class according to Richards (1992).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, journal writing, according to my experience, can be a useful technique for developing language writing for the students, especially for getting started in writing, and can be a valuable procedure for the teacher to gain worthwhile feedback or a reflection of his/her own performance in order to evaluate his/her teaching methods, and then use this description to improve his/her teaching and materials.

## References

1. Numbenchaphon, Saipin. 1989. **Writing in Process**. Choburi : Srinakharinwirot University, Bangsaen Campus.
2. Richards, Jack C. 1992. "Reflective teaching in TESOL Teacher Education." In **Issues in Language Teacher Education**. pp. 1-19. Eugenius Sadtono (ed.) Anthology series 30. Singapore : RELC.
3. SEAMEO Regional Language Centre. 1995. **RELC course Description of course 412 : Specialist in Language Testing 11-30 September 1995**. Singapore : The Centre (Brochure)



# APPENDIX

## REFLECTIVE JOURNAL 1

### COURSE 412 Specialist Certificate in Language Testing

Name : Jiraporn Dhanarattigannon

Date : 12 September 1995

I. I have taught Foundation English I, II, III and Technical English for Veterinary students. First, when the students pass the entrance examination, they will be placed into various foundation English courses according to their English scores. After they finish Foundation III, they will choose other elective courses. Therefore, most of the tests I have done are achievement tests, which I construct in order to know how well the students have learned and if they should pass to study at a higher level or not. The content of the tests will be based on the contents of the texts used in the class and because there are a lot of students grouped into about 40 classes and taught by about 15-20 teachers, we only do a rough specification (only the item format and content of the test are focused). Besides, we have to think about the difficulty of the test, and what language the students have to produce, and the test should serve/match every group in that course. So it seems to me that it is difficult for the test constructors if they have to think about the elicitation mode and item types. However, we do consider marking which seems to be our problems, according to different point of views of the teachers. As a result, we try to make the test more objective and easy to mark. This brings us to another problem; that is when we think about MC, which some of us don't rely of (there are a lot of limitations to constructing the good items), if we do a lot of MC, we're afraid that the students won't be able to produce language.

This is why I would like to learn more about testing. I want to adjust and develop my own test and find appropriate ways to construct tests for large groups (with many teachers).

## II. Understanding about the terms I have learned

Today I learned about the purpose and the test format. It seems to me that the type of the test is based on the purpose of the constructor when he/she creates the test, so if the purpose of the test is not identified or stated, it's difficult for others to

identify its type since there are some overlapping characteristics. For example, Advanced Certificate Test (I'm not sure about the name of the test) used by British Council to measure the ability of the students who want to attend high school in Britain (so it's a proficiency test) may be used as an achievement test (some parts) when they set course to prepare students who would like to improve their English or those who want to take this exam. They can use this type of test to see how well the students taking this course are doing and see whether they can sit for the real test or not. (What do you think about this point?)

After the class and while discussing with some participants, I found myself confused about the terms "direct" and "indirect". I have 3 questions that I would like to discuss with you (lecturer) to clarify them. They are as follows :

1. What is/are the difference(s) between direct performance-referenced and indirect performance-referenced? Could you please give me some examples of tests which are clear cut?

2. Could you please give the examples of indirect system-referenced for reading skill tests?

3. Are these in the format of a test which is indirect system-referenced for writing skill?

- Find the incorrect word in the sentences given (in TOEFL)
- Choose the appropriate word to fill in the blanks (in cloze test).

Thank you so much

**NOTE :** This journal reflects a lecture and questions posed by the lecturer, Ms. Annie Brown. I discussed my questions with her as well.

## **REFLECTIVE JOURNAL 4**

### **COURSE 412 Specialist Certificate in Language Testing**

**Name : Jiraporn Dhanarattigannon**

**Date : 26 September 1995**

#### **Testing the Macro Skills**

**B.R. Sundara Rajan**

In this class, I have learnt more about macro skills and micro skills. What I have learnt from the handouts/materials, activities and discussion in class have been very useful. They help me write the test items more carefully since I have learnt how to create relevant and authentic items, how to judge good and bad items, and above of all, how to adapt the items. It is what I expected before coming here.\* I would like to practice constructing good test items and evaluating the tests being used.

What I would like to see in my test items are creative and authentic test tasks, questions which are precise, not wordy or irrelevant. My problem, sometimes, is I have objective to ask a question, but I can't express or write it in a clear or precise way. Sometimes, I'm not sure that my question will be the one I really want (my students may be misled). From my own experience, the macro skill that I'm mainly dealing with is reading, so the activities and class discussion, including your comments in class make me feel more confident in writing better test items in knowing how to adapt poor ones.\*\*

In your class, we have more opportunities for discussion with colleagues. However, I think we started discussion and constructing the tests quite late. In other words, we should have started construction the test items at the beginning of the second week, so that we would have had more time to evaluate and discuss various skills in class (all macro skills).\*\*\* Nevertheless, better late than never; I still believe that we learned and practiced more about creating good items and evaluating them.

In addition, two more things that I really expect are comment on my own test and more practice (if we can). These will help me a lot. That is, comments from you or my classmates, either the good or bad items, will be very useful for improving myself and my test items in the future. And I do believe in "learning by doing", so if I practise more, I will construct my test better.

Thank you so much for your understanding and comment (I hope you will have some). It has inspired me to create better test and has made me feel more confident in what I intend to do.\*\*\*\*

**NOTE :** There are some responses from Mr. Rajan.

\* I'm glad you got what you expected

\*\* Good

\*\*\* I agree but unfortunately I had to be away in Japan, think we started...

\*\*\*\* Thank you.

Thank you for the information, comment and suggestions, Keep in touch!

And I had a chance to discuss various questions with him as well as getting the comments on my own tests later.