UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' LEARNING EXPERIENCES THROUGH JOURNAL WRITING

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ABSTRACT

This paper will make attempts to understand students learning experiences through journal writing. How students feel about the subject including materials, lecturers, learning activities, how they experience the learning processes, and identify their difficulties are several issues that will be discussed. Various significant issues found in students' journals will also be used to analyze and evaluate classroom activities.

This study is conducted in a particular context of classroomfirst semester undergraduate students of Accounting Department at the Faculty of Economics Universitas Islam Indonesia. The students are obliged to take Output Character Building Program (OCB) which is aimed to prepare new students to readily involve in academic environment and tasks. Data were collected from eight students' journals from two different classes and teacher's journal. They were required to write daily-basis reflective journal at the end of every meeting which is then analyzed to reveal significant issues addressed by students.

The result of the class observation shows that regular journal writing function as a tool of effective communication between students-teachers, a media for students to express their feeling towards learning, promote better teacher-student rapport, and good feedback from students for the betterment of teaching and learning process. At further stages, the findings could be used to evaluate and develop better program.

Keywords: Output Character Building Program, reflective journal writing, students' learning experiences.

A. Introduction

Journal writing is assumed to have an important role in language learning. Reflective journals, for instance, have been used to reveal the students' interest,

motivation and responses to the learning. Additionally, from journal writing, students feel free to express their feeling and attitudes towards learning. Their expression and frankness of feeling and attitudes may help teachers improve their teaching and adjust classroom activities when necessary.

Theoretically, journal use in learning and research has been proven to be effective way to gather significant information. Journals or diaries are often used by researchers to collect data. These private documents are considered as data that are thoughtful and "an unobtrusive source of information" serving as written evidences in research (Creswell, 2003: 187). Brown (2001: 282-283) called this as a dialogue journal in which student records thoughts, ideas, and/or reactions, and the teacher reads and responds with written comments. Journal or diary writing or notes are also commonly used in writing process. Schon (in Shin, 2003, p. 4) divided reflection notes into two categories: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. While reflection-in-action contains "thought process during an event that allows for modification of action as they occur", reflection-on-action is "thinking subsequent to the completion of an event". Shin further explained that "those activities involve constructing and reconstructing experience and can be facilitated through journal writing." Also, journals or diaries can be considered as "introspective tools." This kind of activity may become an effective method to "independently discover and develop individual academic interests and EAP writing capacities" (Myers, 2001, p.482). Simply put, journal writing functions as an instrument to reveal students' direct responses, interests, boredom, and enjoyment of learning. From the understanding of both the definition and the use of journal writing in helping acknowledge learning progress, it can be brought to a close that teachers in any language classroom may use journal writing whenever possible. In this case, the decision to use journal writing to better understand several issues (i.e. objective accomplishment, lively classroom environment, students' progress, and any unexpected situation that may be unseen but present) brings considerable consequences. Among those consequences are time and energy consumption.

Teachers' willingness is also deemed vital in these activities, without which such an immense work would not be appropriately handled. As a teacher, I personally see that journal writing of students and teachers are helpful in revealing the students' responses and therefore they can be used to evaluate learning. The rare use of journal writing in English language learning is rooted from the huge

consequences on teachers' side. While many research use journal writing in writing classes, I tried to employ journal writing in English for Academic Purposes embracing reading skills, study skills and presentation skills. Although writing skills got little portion of the whole learning, students had great chances to write everyday through journal writing. In short, this journal writing is not meant to assess students' writing or reading; rather, it served as a learning log.

B. Output Character Building

OCB is one-semester mandatory program for all new Accounting students involving two subject matters, namely Psychology and English. Psychology is conducted during the first half of odd semester and so is English. Each subject takes 6-week in length or accounted for as many as 30 meetings, from Monday to Friday, 100 minutes each session per day.

Unlike any other program of English for Academic Purposes to stuff students with academic English skill, this program offers totally different context and concept of blending English language learning with personality development. Students are taught academic English reading skills, study skills and presentation skills while at the same time are trained to be mentally ready for entering university academic life.

Prior to the program commencement, both Psychology and English facilitators met to share similar objectives, vision and mission of learning. Although we had different materials to be taught, we had similar learning principles. We based our learning activities on students-centered learning, highly regarding adult learning and nurturing the idea of being autonomous learners. We had small classes ranging from 14-30 students, expecting better teacher-student relationship and maximum involvement in all activities provided. Rules of the game, disciplines, various class activities, rewards and punishments, discussion, individual and group works, and journal writing are important issues to be followed. Interestingly, the psychology sessions are fully prepared with games, instruments, media, slides, assignments and evaluation. Similarly, in English sessions, although all materials were provided, facilitators were free to make up activities suited with the purposes of learning. This, indeed, gives them more freedom to improvise their classroom condition.

The materials used in English subject covered several areas: basic reading skills, study skills, presentation skills, communication skills and a little portion dedicated for writing essays. As the time was extremely limited, communication skills and writing skills were blended in daily class activities such as discussion and journal writing. Students, however, never felt that they were learning many things at the same time.

C. Procedures

As has been previously described, reading students' journals are not easy jobs. Worse still, commenting on them becomes another burden. Nevertheless, the time-consuming work is worth doing due to its effective way to monitor learning. The following is the procedure taken to gather students' journals and later on read, comment and examine them to reveal the real problems faced by them.

Students were asked to write daily basis journals/reflective diary compiling all that happened to them since the very beginning to the end of the semester. At the end of a class session, they wrote and expressed their feeling about what knowledge they got, what advantage they obtained, and what progress they made. These points, in particular, would not seem to be spoken out orally due to many drawbacks such as shyness, inconvenience, and fright. However, they were all out in written expression facilitated with journal writing.

After all journals and diaries were collected, similar patterns on particular issues that appeared were gathered and classified under similar issues. The issues raised by the students are discussed and used to give alternatives to teachers to improve the learning process. The results show that teacher-students relationship is quite close in such a way that students can express their feelings, opinions, and learning difficulties. In addition, indication of material development, teacher's creativity, more interesting classroom activities are among significant issues addressed by students.

D. Journal Writing: The Inside

First meeting seems to become an important process in learning. Although very often that first impression leads to false conclusion, it is, indeed, influential. Students seem to be slightly inhibited in the first meeting and so do teachers. Senior (2006: 85) stated that

> "Language teachers sense that the first few lessons of any new course are of vital importance. This is the time when they meet their students for the first time, when first impressions are created, and when norms of behavior (of either desirable or undesirable kind) are established."

The first impression in a language class or any other class was automatically drawn by both students and teachers. In this research, most students told that the first meeting was such an awkward situation in which first impression was instantly formed. Impression on the teacher, particularly became the biggest worried of the entire unknown. However, their impression was proven to be wrong as they interacted more intensively with the teacher.

> The first time I saw you, *I thought that you were a "killer" teacher who was very discipline. Nonetheless, I was wrong...* In the beginning, I didn't like English, but at the end I loved it. (Odi)

> My first day was...I don't know what to say...*I wasn't feeling 'click' with this subject.* But then I found something I haven't ever got. (Ranny)

> *The first time I entered the English class, I really had no courage and motivation because the teacher seemed to be 'killer" and 'difficult'...but all my prejudice disappeared...* (Trish)

> *Honestly, first I saw the teacher; I thought that the class she taught would be boring...* (Budi)

> *At the beginning, I didn't feel enthusiastic because the class used English.* I am not confident enough to use English in conversation... (Tini)

> The first day of teaching OCB was great. The students seemed to be quite responsive. However, I saw some students were passive, uninterested, and even sleepy. What a challenge-to-be! I had to make them active and started a positive environment to learn. (Teacher Diary/25-11-2007)

Another issue addressed in students' journals was classroom environment. Classroom environment is vital in language learning. According to Dornyei, classroom climate is said to be ideal when "there is no tension in the air; students are at ease; there are no sharp-let alone hostile-comments made up to ridicule each other. There are no put-downs or sarcasm. Instead there is mutual trust and respect. No need for anyone to feel anxious or insecure" (2001: 41). Meanwhile, "classes with informal atmospheres provide teachers with plentiful feedback, allowing them to judge in an ongoing way the success of their teaching practicesand to adjust them as necessary" (Senior, 2006: 82)

In this observation, the second and the third days were saliently the 'melting' points in which students started to adapt to the teachers' style and the learning environment. Situation changed from awkwardness to comfort, faces turned from the unkind to kind, learning transformed from tense to relaxed, but lively and focused. Hence, these conditions allow learning to be conducted well.

The evidences for this were the students' journals and my own diary as depicted in the following extracts.

> I saw that some students seemed to enjoy their learning. *They did not feel tense, even a group laughed much during the discussion.* (Teacher Diary, 28/11/07)
>
> In classroom, I was learning with joy, no nervousness, no pressure...therefore I enjoyed every session...I felt I was learning with someone I knew very closely... (Budi).
>
> The learning process was nice... the class situation was not tense at all... (Rafi).

Thus, teachers that understand the circumstances do not need to worry about the learning process at all; instead they can focus more on variety of learning and how to help students achieve the objectives of learning. At this point, it could be interpreted that the journal functions as a means of communication. Students tell teachers that they are totally fine and that they even can enjoy their learning processes.

Getting new knowledge and experience are, indeed, self fulfilling. To further extent, motivation could become new enlightenment and great energizer. As an example for this, students' who thought that they got something from their learning would feel confident and satisfied since they could improve their ability in a particular field. Soon after, they would feel recharged with new energy coming from the self-fulfillment. Dornyei (2001: 57) confirmed that "expectancy is in the mind of the learner." These inspiring words do make huge changes. Teachers considerably need to motivate learners by any constructive and effective means. One of the ways is "to increase their expectancies by consciously arranging the conditions in a way that they put the learner in a more positive or optimistic mood (2001: 57-58). In practice, there could be several ways to promote this such as sufficient preparation, offering assistance, and giving students more chances to help one another. This situation occurred sometime in the classroom.

> Once, one of my students did not want to answer my question when I asked her. I asked her why. She said she couldn't understand the reading passage at all because there were so many unknown vocabularies. I was thinking that it was probably my right time to motivate her since she looked very unconfident with her ability. I told her to read one paragraph, but I asked her to stop every sentence. Then, I asked her which words she didn't know the meaning. She mentioned one or two words. I convinced her by asking "How many words do you understand the meanings compared to those that you don't?" She smiled, without answering. I asked her the meanings of several words in the paragraph and she could easily understand them. I smiled. I told her that she really had no problems to understand the sentence at all. I did that together with her until she finished one paragraph. Feeling relieved, eventually she was able to tell me what the paragraph was about. The next was my mouthful of motivation words for her... (Teacher Diary, 8/10/07).

Frustration seems to emerge when learning is not accomplished. Some evidences of this could be grasped in the students' daily journals. Surprisingly, students' direct responses on certain situation were deliberately spoken out. Some students found out the class was interesting, sometimes bored while others got motivation and new experiences.

> I am confused, bored and sad because I can't make brainstorming. I'm confused with what I have to write. Bored!!! (Budi)

> I think it is interesting to know how to write good essay. I'm happy because I get new knowledge and it will really help me to write essay. But sometimes I feel bored... (Sarah)

What those two students feel about brainstorming activities do make me a little bit guilty in terms of my possible uninteresting class activities. Besides, brainstorming becomes the part of writing process from which students will get knowledge and practices prior to completing their final paper project.

What come across my mind was that I tried to figure out whether the learning activities had not been exciting and challenging enough. The following was a spontaneous idea where I tried to think of an activity which may help students to release their boredom.

> I really had to create interesting and fun activities. Okay, I'll try to find out a way....may be a game of word categories will do. (Teacher diary/1-12-08)

Knowing that students could be terribly bored with learning sessions, teachers should be aware of this and are spontaneously demanded to give alternative activities that may turn the unbeneficial circumstances and thus save the learning from dullness.

As learning goes on, both students and teachers may undergo both motivation drawbacks and self-refinement. Teachers may concern with pursuing objective accomplishment while at the same time they may, to some extent, slowly loose motivation. The same is also true for students as they may at the same time are 'bored' with class routines. In the same way, students as well as teachers may gain self-confidence or self-refinement as they know their class, the people, materials, and environment.

As one of the learning objectives was to write a short essay following steps of writing, students were asked to choose a topic, did the brainstorming, planning, drafting and finally revising and editing. Therefore, students were asked to revise several times before they submitted the paper. Some students realized that this was the first they knew that there were so many steps before finalizing their papers.

> We had techniques of how to improve our reading skills such as previewing, skimming, making notes, etc. But I don't like to make notes, because it was really boring... Making notes or making summary was the same: just one word: boring. (Sarah)

Teachers may necessarily respond to this problem of boredom that is often faced by students. To my mind, explaining and guiding students to make notes may look easier than making summary. Yet, when boredom seems to become the main issue to be raised, teachers should find alternatives to cheer up the "making notes and summary" activities.

> I just couldn't figure out better activities for making summary. What coming across to my mind is just giving them models and ask them to summarize an article. Give them time to complete the task then try to have a peer checking. I haven't got any better idea on this... (Teacher diary/12-08)

Motivation and self-confidence may become two important parts in learning. Teachers that keep encouraging their students could surely help students overcome their uncertainty and worries. According to Brown (2001: 63), "giving ample verbal and nonverbal assurances to students will in turn ease students to adapt and face learning problems...As a teacher you are called on to sustain self-

confidence where it already exists and to build it where it doesn't." This suggests that teachers have responsibilities to help students deal with their learning as well as maintain their self-confidence. Benefits of lesson are another issue addressed by students in their journals. In their journal, students felt that they could get as many benefits as the variation of lessons. They could learn how speak in front of their friends as well as understand reading more effectively.

> The most important thing I got was motivation... *Now I can speak in front of many people better than before.* I didn't know how speak in front of people formally... (Budi)
>
> *In my presentation I got experience about how to overcome my nervousness in front of the audience.* I try to be confident in my presentation...I tried to speak in front of the audience...it's easier...the session was interesting. (Rafi)
>
> I learnt reading as well. Many people say that reading [read: books] is the window to the world. I agree with the statement because I can widen and update my knowledge and I can spend my leisure time. In this class, I study some steps to read English textbook. *It's complicated but I keep practicing. I understand that I must think in English when I read English textbooks. The method can help read English textbook faster and I can understand the content more effectively as well.* (Tini).
>
> We learned about how to make good essay. There were some steps...We were given a task to write an essay. I tried to follow the steps. Even though my short essay was still bad, *I was eager to revise it by trying to get more information about the topic and try to understand it.* (Ranny)
>
> I think it (writing essays) is the most difficult one because I seldom write in English. Therefore I don't have many vocabularies to develop my essay. *I don't give up with the problem. I tried to find many...* (Sarah)

From the students' writing, it may be clear that as soon as teachers could identify students' difficulties in learning, they should take immediate responses to maintain students' encouragement. Teachers could suggest some relevant materials to be learned and probably giving some more exercises could be of a great help.

Discussing about the impact of feedbacks on students' journals could not be put away from kinds of feedback. In this research, teacher's feedbacks were in the form of letters written in the students' journals. This, in turn, functions as a

means of communication. As Dornyei clearly stated that "It is the feedback you give to your students in class or on their written papers that has the most salient role in bringing about changes in their learning behaviors". Positive feedback may involve positive, descriptive feedback regarding student strengths, achievements, progress and attitudes. Accordingly, students are provided with information, not judgments (2001: 122-123). In this research, the students made reply letter. Never were they told what to say in their letters, because this letter that I wrote served as stimulation and as a way to give feedback on their assignments. Besides, they were free to express their feeling in the letters to show how they could be fluent in writing letters. Most students felt extremely happy when receiving my short letter containing mostly what they had and gave them motivation to go on. More importantly, teachers can control the students' attitude towards a subject or materials. Emerging problems that the students have can immediately be responded through various classroom activity, assessment, or enrichment.

Dear Joy,

Once again, I'm stunned with your writing. It's beautifully constructed and expressed. Your language is very good and there are only few mistakes that you made. Besides, your ideas flow quite fluently.

I believe you're a diligent student as you always complete your journal. Your handwriting is also very neat. People will love reading them, including me. Thank for making me easier to correct mistakes.

I hope that you read more and of course, write more. Please use this journal to communicate your ideas…

Keep learning, be active and creative. I believe that you can be one of those successful if you really try…

Dear Mam,

After read your opinion about me, I'm very surprised, Mam. You know what?! It makes me fly (^_^) I hope it's true from your deep heart he…he… Besides, your opinion gives me support to be better and better.

You said that I'm diligent student but I'm not sure about it. I just try to be diligent cause in the past I am a lazy boy he..he..I just want to change it. But thanks a lot Mam.

> Mam I have some trouble with my English lesson. I can't pronounce my English handsome eh…beautifully may be it cause my tongue which usually speak Javanese..he..he… what should I do (^_^)
>
> …
>
> Okey Mam I think its enough. I will keep learning, be active and creative. I believe I can reach my future with your help. I will continue this struggle he…he.. I will really try… See you Mam.. (Joy)

From the reply letter of Joy, it is quite clear that he doesn't realize that he may have good English writing which can be seen from his fluent ideas through sentences. It is also pleasing to know that he is greatly motivated to change his negative behavior from lazy to diligent. In addition, he also thinks that he has problems with pronunciation. The communication through writing can become a good start to develop students' ability to write, to understand students' difficulties in learning, and to encourage them to learn harder. Students are quite open in response to their own problems in learning. This, in addition, can be good clues for teachers to consider giving ways out for them. The following extract shows how a student feels that she can not write references in essay, and therefore she may require more exercises on citing and listing other people's work in their essay.

> I don't know how to make good essays, but I tried to write it in Bahasa Indonesia, a little bit English. And my problems were that I could not write references in essay.

Another attention-grabbing issue is the power of teamwork. As is generally known, class interaction should give positive effects for learners to become more mature and sociable. Effective interaction will result in better learning environment and thus the learning processes.

> Sometimes we had to evaluate what we have got. We remembered the topic yesterday; honestly it made my brain work. Almost every meeting we had teamwork… *That was really good I think, we became closer than before.* (Sarah)
>
> *I got motivation to improve my English.* I must study and study, practice more. I can be self confident as well. In this subject, I can make essay although not good, and I can use dictionary better than before. I learn to know new words. I can think in English too, although sometimes I still translate into Bahasa Indonesia… (Hani)

Teamwork has long been a good way to learn cooperatively and often motivation could be recharged simply from peer sharing in which students interact more intensively.

Several important points offered by the students' journals were students' hindrances from learning, feeling concerning with classroom environment, materials, motivation, boredom, self-confidence, benefits of learning, objective accomplishment, and awareness raising. From their journal writings, it was discovered that self-reflection raises awareness and eventually self-healing and self-empowering. In contrast, students' difficulties reflected in the journals could be analyzed to develop further follow-up program to help them. Consequently, materials and classroom activities are subjects to evaluation in regard to students' interest and pedagogical reasoning.

E. Discussion

Frustration was one of important issues greatly addressed by students. The feeling of "my writing was not good", "my vocabulary was not enough to speak my ideas", "bored", "confused" and "nervous" are seemingly high frequent words that students almost always deal with. To tackle these issues, teachers really have to vary their teaching, such as switching activities when realizing that students look bored, re-explaining when students are in total confusion (very often teachers are needed to deal with this through individual approach as students seem to be shy when they do not understand something), and showing appreciation and creating comfort when students are struggling to finish some exercises.

Another issue concerning with students' progress was learning objective accomplishment. As an evidence of this, students indicated that they learned to write papers through "new steps"choosing topics, brainstorming, planning, drafting, revising and editing. Through their paper projects, they understood that they had to follow those steps to produce good papers. Those steps, however, were somewhat new to them as when writing they directly wrote everything coming across their mind.

Based on theory, objective accomplishment could be measured by evaluation conducted in regular meeting, in the middle of the course, or at the end of the course. The results of the evaluation are used to assess students' success in

learning and to adjust the next lessons and materials (Brown, 2001: 151). In this research, objective accomplishment is also seen from the point of view of the students. It may not be able to justify the students' success; however, these evidences could become reflections of their success. As they wrote in their journals that they understood how to make brainstorming, for example, teachers could check their work on brainstorming. When different assumptions occurred, teachers accordingly needed to clarify the students' understanding on brainstorming. This is called immediate response to learning.

The core meaning of this immediate correction may make learning more effective since misunderstanding could be minimized and objective achievement could be predicted. However, this situation may demand particular attention on certain learning topics, which in turn may affect the terminal objectives as a whole. To overcome this, teachers really have to manage the time well so that there would not be materials left behind.

An interesting process did emerge during my class session. I never anticipated that the students would be so generous with words in writing. I wrote letters in the students' journals giving comments on their work, praising what they did that day, appreciating their participation and motivating them. Students were then encouraged to write a response letter. To my surprise, all students in the class wrote such one-full page lettersan amount that I never even expected as I had often asked my students to write but only a sentence or two were made. From their letters, it is salient that students were eager to write and express their feeling. They responded well all the comments that I wrote and they agreed to my assumption of their ability. Surprisingly, without being asked, several students talked about their difficulties in learning English. A student asked how to improve pronunciation, and another asked about how to speak English fluently and become more self-confident. To be brief, this journal writing activity function as effective way to help students learn, express ideas frankly, and serve as ways for teachers to give motivation.

F. Conclusion

Journal writing is a good instrument to understand students' responses on learning in a way that teachers can make improvement for the next classroom activity. It is a good way to establish students-teachers rapport through written

communication containing students' responses towards learning processes, students' difficulties, and motivation. Another positive advantage is that journal writing gives opportunities to students to learn to write and express their feeling freely so that students are daily-exposed to writing. As students are accustomed to writing, they are eventually expected to better deal with their academic tasks.

Despite the amount of time and energy spent on responding to students' journals, the information contained in the journals are believed to be meaningful for learning and teaching processes. Unwillingness, boredom, discouragement and nervousness that often emerge in a process of learning can be reduced through various class activities, material enrichment, and good students and teacher rapport. Once teachers understand what the students feel about the learning, what obstacles the students have, and what becomes the interest of the students, learning could be of great fun and worthy experiences that will bring students to academic success.

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