

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## EFL Students' Attitudes towards the Use of Diaries in Learning Writing Skills

**Nguyen Thi Nha Phuong**

Lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, Tra Vinh University, Vietnam

**Pham Nhu Loan**

Lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, Tra Vinh University, Vietnam

### **Abstract:**

*Being proficient in writing requires regular practice, while learners do not have enough motivation to write outside class. The study investigates the attitudes of EFL students towards the use of diaries as a pedagogical tool for improving writing skills. In order to achieve these central objectives, a mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods was conducted. The participants were 60 second-year EFL students (at a Vietnamese university) who were interested in the research and returned the completed diaries and questionnaire document. The results of this study suggested that almost all of the students found writing diaries beneficial in the improvement of writing skills and motivation in learning writing. In addition, they liked using the diaries and desired to use them in their next language course because they were convinced of their effects on improving their writing and enhancing learning motivation.*

**Keywords:** Writing skills, diaries, motivation, language use

### **1. Introduction**

Writing is considered the ultimate language skill among the four basic language skills. As claimed by Hamp and Heasley (2006), it is imperative not only for native speakers but also for foreign or second language learners. This language skill provides learners with benefits both in learning English and in their future careers. Glazier (1994) argued that English writing ability is essential in university and can be an asset in our careers. English writing is considered the most difficult and problematic of the four main English language skills for higher-education Vietnamese students (Nguyen, 2009). This can be explained by the fact that writing skills do not simply test the writer's ability to use language (such as grammar, vocabulary and punctuation) but also include the development of ideas and experiences on diverse writing topics.

There are many reasons why students have difficulty learning to write. Homstad and Thorson (1996) commented that writing in a second language is a frustrating and complicated task; therefore, students tend to be reluctant to spend their time on writing practice in or outside classrooms. In this regard, Hedge (1991) claimed that learners are not motivated enough to practice writing at regular intervals due to the nature of writing itself. It can be explained that there is nothing more frustrating than a writing assignment, knowing that their writing will be read carefully by the teacher, looking for errors, and needing corrections rather than being read for entertainment. On the other hand, some students do not experience complete boredom in writing but have difficulty in finding ideas because they often have to write about what the teacher assigns rather than about what has a lot to do with them. Byrne (1991) observed that having no ideas is a common problem when learners are asked to write.

Besides the aforementioned problems, time pressure also hampers learners' writing efficiency. It is obvious that in the English classroom, learners are required to finish their writing products within the allotted time. Therefore, many learners are sometimes struggling to complete their tasks. The writing process is quite long because it may involve some stages before a complete essay is produced. In this regard, Chandrasegaran (2002) pointed out that a common problem in writing classes is that some students spend more time to write an essay compared to others. Many students also never manage to complete their writing during class time.

To overcome the above difficulties, Lagan (2000) pointed out the value of writing a diary. Lagan concluded that writing is a skill, which means the more time you spend practising writing, the more proficient you become. A great way to practice writing, even before you start writing your essay, is to keep a daily journal.

Based on Lagan's comments, the author conducted this research to find out whether students can overcome the mentioned difficulties by engaging in diaries through a survey of their attitudes toward its effectiveness in learning English Writing. From this survey, it can be proposed that this tool be used to cultivate writing skills for students in the writing teaching and learning process.

### 1.1. Research Questions

The current research aims to investigate the implementation of a diary by EFL students' during their writing course. In particular, students' attitudes towards the benefits of writing diaries and the use of this extra activity in writing courses are analysed. The research questions include the following:

- What benefits do the EFL students perceive from using diaries in their writing course?
- What are the EFL students' attitudes towards the use of this activity in their writing course?

### 1.2. Significance of the study

The Vietnamese EFL participants were directly involved in writing diaries during the course without worrying about the score or any comments from the class teacher. Therefore, from a practical point of view, this activity can help learners improve their writing skills and establish a routine for writing. In addition, their attitudes towards using diaries in their learning journey will be identified, which can help lecturers consider implementing this tool in teaching English writing in this context.

## 2. Literature Review

While writing in the classroom is an indispensable part of academic learning, engaging in writing outside of class can serve as a valuable tool for improving writing abilities (Chandrasegaran, 2002). Keeping a diary is regarded as an effective way to practice writing at home. According to Spaventa (2000), diaries are personal notebooks where individuals document ideas, opinions, and daily experiences. Diaries play a significant role in fostering creativity among writers. In other words, diaries, also referred to as journals or learner autobiographies in the field of language education, allow participants (e.g. learners or language professionals) to write about their learning experiences without any restriction imposed by particular questions (Mackey & Gass, 2015).

Keeping a diary helps learners become better writers because it offers them more opportunities to express themselves freely whenever they wish to write. According to Hamp and Heasley (2006), the most obvious way to improve writing skills is through regular writing. Apart from fulfilling assigned writing tasks, learners are advised to keep their own diaries. They recommend making a habit of writing down what they think in English about anything that you like about every day. Then, learners will surprise themselves by creating written pages.

It can be seen that teaching writing is a process, and teachers should encourage students to write as much as possible. This can help them improve writing fluency and quality (Hyland, 2002). Furthermore, in the study of Taqi and colleagues (2015), they demonstrated that daily diary writing helps students improve their language when writing, especially vocabulary and grammar.

Similarly, White and Arndt (1991) also suggested that this technique is considered an effective way to motivate learners to learn writing and develop the ability to express themselves fluently. It also helps students understand the reasons behind their desire to convey thoughts and encourages them to perceive writing not just as a form of self-expression but also as a conversation in written form with the readers. More importantly, since the main purpose of writing diaries is to encourage writers to participate and enjoy writing (White & Arndt, 1991), students certainly find writing diaries as a pleasurable activity, free from worrying about making mistakes and being under time pressure (Spaventa, 2000).

In fact, if students have more opportunities to write about what concerns them, it will be an effective learning strategy (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Keeping a diary enables students to record their personal experiences or daily activities. In relation to the value of writing outside class, Artof (1992), quoted in Tin (2000), said that diaries are a potential instrument for uncovering our latent creative abilities, sharpening our perception of the world, coming up with solutions to unresolved problems, expressing our opinions and emotions, and enhancing our learning motivation. Writing regularly can help learners enhance writing proficiency and cognitive skills, fostering greater understanding and empathy between individuals and improving our ability to connect with others.

In addition, maintaining a diary offers students a chance to enhance their individual writing skills while also acting as a useful platform for documenting their thoughts and feelings. Spaventa (2000) also suggested that there are many benefits to keeping a diary. At the end of the course, students will have compiled documentation of their acquired knowledge, reading materials, experiences and reflections from that period. In convincing learners of the value of a diary, Lagan (2000) emphasised that it fosters the practice of expressing ideas on paper and shows writers what they think can be explored in the process. Diaries can become your habit and serve as a continuous source of inspiration for further papers.

Keeping a diary is seen not only as a way to help learners have a habit of recording their thoughts on paper but also as a way to refine the accuracy of writing skills. Lagan (2000) shows a relationship between logical thinking and accuracy, that if someone does not think clearly, she or he will not produce a coherent writing product. It is certainly not expected that the initial writings of an average student would be insightful and logical, whereas, afterwards, with the guidance of class teachers, keeping a diary can ultimately help students hone their critical thinking and enhance language accuracy. Furthermore, as keeping a diary can guide students in discovering ideas during the writing process (Lagan, 2000), it can help eliminate the confusion students often experience due to a lack of ideas, helping students write essays more fluently. According to some authors, diaries are considered a type of creative writing that can help students develop ideas and write more fluently and accurately. This is also cited by Tin (2004): "Creative writing activities can change students' perceptions not merely on writing but also on themselves and the world they live in, lower their anxiety, and develop their writing proficiency, accuracy and personalities."

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Method

During the teaching process of Writing 3 for sophomore English language majors, the author guided and encouraged students to keep a diary as an alternative activity outside of class and submit it to the author after the course to verify if they had completed the required number of entries. The course consisted of 15 weeks, thus requiring a minimum of 15 entries, but students can write more according to their preferences. After the course, the author sent survey questions to the students. The questionnaire included questions about students' attitudes about the effectiveness of writing diaries for learning to write. The questionnaire includes 12 questions on a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree). The author uses SPSS software to analyse data.

#### 3.2. Participants

The population of interest in this case was a cohort of 70 sophomore English-majors from two classes at a Vietnamese University. These students had studied two writing courses and were starting to study writing at level 3. The researcher figured out that they have many difficulties in writing in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and ideas, especially because they lack the motivation to write outside of classrooms. Therefore, this activity will be a beneficial experience for them in learning writing skills. Participation was completely voluntary, and those students who agreed to participate wrote diaries for 15 weeks. Once they completed the diaries in the fifteenth week, they filled in the questionnaire. The majority of the participants (n=60) returned the diaries and questionnaires.

#### 3.3. Data Collection

The class teacher who was also the researcher of this study explained the instructions to write diaries. After 15 weeks, the participants were asked to submit their diaries to the teacher so that the teacher could check whether they had completed the required number of entries and then filled in the questionnaire.

### 4. Findings

#### 4.1. Students' Attitude towards the Effects of Writing Diaries

##### 4.1.1. The Effects of Writing a Diary on Students' Writing Skills

Based on table 1, the majority of students believe that keeping a diary helps improve various aspects contributing to enhancing their writing skills. Specifically, over half of the students agree that it helps them overcome writer's difficulties in ideas (33%), and 67% strongly agree. This aligns with Lagan's (2000) view that keeping a diary teaches writers how to generate ideas during the writing process. Daily practice enables students to find ideas more easily while writing.

Similarly, most students admitted that they could minimise spelling and punctuation errors (33% and 50%, respectively). It can be seen that regular writing helps students retain vocabulary and accurate spelling while also allowing them to regulate their punctuation usage based on emotional flow.

In terms of language, the majority of students believe that maintaining a diary is an opportunity for them to enhance their vocabulary and grammar structures (50% agree and 42% strongly agree). This corresponds to Taqi et al.'s (2015) study, which suggests that diary writing helps students improve their writing skills, particularly in terms of vocabulary and grammar.

Statements	Percentage (%) of Students				
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neural	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Writing diaries helps me overcome difficulties in generating ideas.				33	67
2. Writing diaries helps me limit spelling and punctuation errors.			17	33	50
3. Writing diaries helps me improve my vocabulary and sentence structure.			8	50	42
4. Writing diaries helps me write more fluently.				50	50

Table 1: The Effects of Keeping a Diary on Writing Skills

##### 4.1.2. The Effects of Writing a Diary in Improving Students' Motivation to Learn Writing

The results from table 2 show that the majority of students affirmed that writing a diary helps students be more motivated when learning to write. Specifically, more than half of the students agreed with the statement that writing a diary helps them enjoy writing more (62%). Writing a diary is also an activity that helps students reduce the feeling of boredom when writing tests or final exams. Among the students surveyed, one hundred percent of students agreed with

this opinion (42% agreed and 52% strongly agreed). This corresponds to the conclusions of White and Arndt (1991). Compared to the past when writing tasks were reviewed by the teacher, which made students feel pressured, writing a diary regularly has helped students overcome this feeling. It can be seen that they can freely express their thoughts and perspectives on issues rather than producing a writing following a framework. In addition, all students admitted that writing regularly gives them more motivation to practise their writing skills simply because journaling helps them freely develop ideas without much involvement in making mistakes and time pressure (White & Arndt, 1991).

Statements	Percentage (%) of Students				
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neural	Agree	Strongly Agree
5. Writing diaries helps me enjoy writing more.			5	62	33
6. Writing diaries helps me reduce the feeling of boredom when writing essays or taking exams.				42	58
7. Writing diaries helps me gain more motivation in practising writing.				17	83

Table 2: The Effects of Keeping a Diary on Students' Motivation to Learn Writing

#### 4.1.3. Other Effects of Writing a Diary on Students

Besides the benefits related to writing skills, keeping a journal also helps students gain other advantages. Specifically, nearly 100% of students agree that daily writing activities help them enhance their critical thinking skills and problem-solving abilities. This benefit was also highlighted by Artof (1992), as cited in Tin (2000) in their research. They affirmed that a journal is a powerful tool to uncover our untapped creative strengths, to see the world more clearly, to provide solutions to unresolved issues, and to express our opinions and emotions. Consequently, students can develop both writing skills and awareness, fostering greater understanding and knowledge among individuals.

Moreover, this is considered a positive activity as learners are given the freedom to express their emotions and record what has happened in their lives (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). The students surveyed in this study also agreed with this notion. Additionally, they acknowledged that they kept their collections even after the course ended. As Spaventa (2000) concluded, diary writers will have a record of what they have learned, read, experienced, and thought during that time.

Statements	Percentage (%) of Students				
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neural	Agree	Strongly Agree
8. Writing a diary helps me enhance my critical thinking skills and problem-solving abilities.			7	61	32
9. Writing a diary helps me freely express my emotions.				92	8
10. Writing a diary helps me maintain a collection for myself after studying.				75	25

Table 3: Other Effects of Writing Diaries

#### 4.2. Students' Attitudes towards the Use of Diaries

From the survey results presented in table 4, it is evident that students have a positive attitude towards the application of journal writing in the writing learning process. Specifically, 63% and 35% of students agree and strongly agree, respectively, that journaling is beneficial for writing skills. Additionally, all students expressed their willingness to continue this activity in the following semesters, with 100% agreement among the participants.

Statements	Percentage (%) of Students				
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neural	Agree	Strongly Agree
11. I find keeping a diary very helpful when learning writing skills.			2	63	35
12. I want to maintain this habit for the upcoming semesters.				37	63

Table 4: Students' Attitudes towards the Use of Diaries

## 5. Conclusion

The results from this study demonstrate the benefits of writing diaries as an extended activity to nurture students' motivation to write and enhance their writing skills. Additionally, it is evident that the majority of students enjoy writing

diaries and wish to maintain this habit in future semesters. This indicates that writing diaries is a beneficial activity and should be implemented in the teaching process of writing skills for students.

## 6. References

- i. Artof, S. D. (1992). Use of personal writing for personal growth. In Tin, T. B. (Ed.), *Creative Writing in EFL/ESL Classrooms* (pp. 199-210). University Putra Malaysia Press.
- ii. Chandrasegaran, A. (2002). Intervening to help in the writing process. *SEAMEO Regional Language Centre*.
- iii. Chickering, A. W., & Gamson, Z. F. (1987). Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *AAHE Bulletin*, 3(7).
- iv. Hamp-Lyons, L., & Heasley, B. (2006). *Study Writing: A Course in Written English for Academic Purposes*. Cambridge University Press.
- v. Harmer, J. (2001). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Longman.
- vi. Hedge, T. (1991). *Writing*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
- vii. Homstad, T., & Thorson, H. (1996). Using writing-to-learn activities in the foreign language classroom. *Citeseer*.
- viii. Lagan, J. (2000). *College Writing Skills*. London: Longman.
- ix. Mackey, A., & Gass, S. M. (2015). *Second Language Research: Methodology and Design*. Routledge.
- x. Nguyen, T. H. H. (2009). Teaching EFL writing in Vietnam: Problems and solutions—a discussion from the outlook of applied linguistics. *VNU Journal of Foreign Studies*, 25(1).
- xi. Skehan, P. (1996). A framework for the implementation of task-based instruction. *Applied Linguistics*, 17(1), 38-62.
- xii. Spaventa, S. (2000). Essay writing.
- xiii. Taqi, H. A., Akbar, R. S., Al-Nouh, N. A., & Dashti, A. A. (2015). The effect of diary writing on EFL students' writing and language abilities. *British Journal of Education*, 3(2), 75-91.
- xiv. Tin, T. B. (2004). *Creative Writing in EFL/ESL Classrooms*. University Putra Malaysia Press.
- xv. White, R., & Arndt, V. (1991). *Process Writing: Longman Handbook for Language Teachers*.
- xvi. Wilson, P., & Glazier, T. F. (2013). *The Least You Should Know About English: Writing Skills, Form C*. Cengage Learning.