



Enhancing Class XI Students' Writing Skills through Journaling: An Action Research Study at Lhuentse Higher Secondary School

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Abstract

Journaling has been one of the academic enhancement programs of Lhuentse Higher Secondary School, but its impact was never studied. This action research, therefore, aimed at finding out the impacts of journaling on the writing skills of class eleven students. Hence, an essay writing test of 200 to 250 words was conducted to assess the writing skills of the students before the intervention. Then baseline data from class eleven students (N=151) were collected through survey questionnaires. Based on the findings of the baseline data, intervention strategies were administered for six months starting from May. The second written test was conducted in the first week of November followed by the gathering of post-intervention data through post-survey questionnaires (N=151). Findings indicated that journaling has helped in enhancing writing habits, resulting in the improvement of writing skills and performance. Similarly, post-intervention data found that students are more motivated and confident in writing. Therefore, we recommend journaling to be implemented starting from the primary classes for the enhancement of students' academic performance.

Keywords: Writing habit, writing skills, class eleven students, motivation, and journaling.

Introduction

Lhuentse Higher Secondary School (LHSS) had 507 students enrolled in the academic year 2021; out of which, 150 were day scholars, and the remaining 357 were boarding students. The school has consistently been among the nation's top ten schools, performing well in many subjects. However, English is not one of those subjects. The students of LHSS have been underperforming. The mean mark of the school is often below the national mean, or at best, a few points above the national mean. According to the pupil performance report, the national means for 2020, 2019 and 2018 were 56.7, 56.3, 50.7 (Class XII) and 65.9, 63.5, 59.0 (class X) respectively (Bhutan Council for School Examinations and Assessment (BCSEA), 2021; BCSEA, 2020; BCSEA, 2019). This has deprived many of the high-performing students of the school of pursuing scholarships abroad, all because their English marks were not up to the mark.

The study culture of the school is excellent as no student will be found without a book or wasting time loitering and gossiping. Students are hardworking, and that suffices for most subjects. The rote memorization they utilize is enough to get them the desired results. However, when it comes to English, they fail. English is a subject that leans more towards skill than knowledge, so the things they memorize do not help them because they are not equipped with the skills they are supposed to possess. Srikrai et al. (2016, p. 304) reported that when it came to language, Thai students faced difficulty in “academic writing, reading, listening and speaking, and other academic study skills”. This is similar to the students of LHSS. To improve, they need to write constantly, but they do not. They are under the assumption that the things that they learned in class and memorization are sufficient. Even when they want to write, the pressure of trying to write correctly and following all the writing rules is daunting and often pushes them away from writing constantly.

Journaling significantly impacts every student's life if they nurture the practice of journaling. It will help them improve their writing skill, set goals, maneuver their daily activity so they never lose track of it, and gradually achieve their goals. As was explained by Castellanos (2008), a journal is a place where the thinking can become visible, a place where ideas, considering what others think, make connections between new and prior information, the thinking strategies are examined, and own learning judged. With this mindset, journaling was attempted to be made into a part of the student's life. In order to examine how it helped with their writing and how to improve it, this action research was conceptualized.

Literature Review

English is the third language for Lhuentse children, with Dzongkha as the second and their mother tongue the first. Behroozia et al. (2014) found that learning a second or a foreign language is difficult for all children whose first language is not English; they need support and a conducive environment as well as meaningful experience to make the language learning effective. Though learning a foreign language is a problematic phenomenon, students of secondary schools are expected to acquire specific writing skills. Studies also suggest that poor writing habits of the students have hindered their motivation and written performance.

Writing is a difficult task for students. According to Huy (2015), it is an essential skill many students are not interested in learning. They think that writing in English only consists of spelling and grammar, failing to see the blunder they are making; as he further states, “writing is a complex metacognitive activity that draws on an individual’s knowledge, basic skill, strategies, and ability to coordinate multiple processes” (Huy, 2015, p. 59). Even when the students are willing and interested, the way it is taught makes it a big hurdle. Students are usually assigned written assignments, which are required to be completed within a specific time frame. These are later subjected to the critical scrutiny of the teacher and given individual assessments, which drowns their motivations and pressurizes them. This makes most of the students uncomfortable (Tuan, 2010).

Most students fail to understand that writing is a skill; the more they write, the better they get (Herrero, 2007). He further explains that this lack of distinction between knowledge and skill makes them unable to transfer the things they learn in one course and apply it to another. Thus, according to Tuan (2010), maintaining a daily journal is one of the excellent ways to flex their writing muscles and practice writing. Furthermore, journal writing helps learners write better and better days since it gives learners more opportunities to freely write about what they wish to whenever they feel like writing (Tuan, 2010). The most obvious way to help oneself become a good writer is by writing. Langan (2001) also claims that one excellent way to get practice in writing is to start with a daily journal. Journaling is an activity where students can always write wherever they go. Hence, writing a journal will help students to develop writing habits and transcribe thoughts on paper.

Journaling can also be a pleasant experience for the students since the main aim of keeping a journal is to write daily and become interested in writing without worrying much about errors and time (Huy, 2015). He also stated that this removes the discomfort of the teacher’s critical eyes and the pressure of time they are subjected to. This allows them to immerse in the complicated and coordinated processes that writing is and even find

enjoyment in it. Herrero (2017) found that journal assists in making writing a regular part of one's life, which in turn helps to turn the knowledge that the students acquired in one course into practical skills they can utilize whenever they want.

Existing literature suggests that it becomes an active learning technique when students are given a chance to maintain a journal (Tuan, 2010). It allows the students to record the happenings of their personal life and the activities surrounding them. As Tuan (2010) argues, it also allows them to find untapped creative power, uncover their family history, learn to see the world more clearly, heal unsolved issues, understand their fears, and explore their motivation. Further, according to Tuan (2010, p. 84), personal writing allows the students to "develop both writing skills and awareness, develop greater awareness and interpersonal understanding, increasing the ability to relate to others". They can also create their framework for interpreting the event and applying concepts learned in class to think spatially and critically, allowing them to participate actively in their learning (Hooey & Bailey, 2005). That is to say, journaling enhances reflective practice, a much-required method of self-examination that involves looking back over what has happened in practice to improve or encourage professional growth (Blake, 2005).

Problem statement

LHSS has been underperforming or barely making through in English. The subject marks of classes X and XII of 2018 and 2019 attest to it. In 2018, the school mean of class XII English was 50.55, and the national mean was 50.74, with the school needing 0.19 to reach the national standard. In 2019, the school mean was 54.11 and the national mean 56.32, the school missing the mark by 2.21. The class X students of the school fared better in 2018, with the school mean at 62.4, whereas the national mean was 59.04. However, in 2019, the school mean was 64.2, and the national mean was 63.53, barely cutting. This evidence clearly shows that students are not doing well in English.

Similarly, BCSEA (2015, as cited in Wangchuk & Zangmo, 2021) reported low performances among Bhutanese students in English. The problem is not with the students but with their habits. Around 70% of the students in the school are focused on other subjects but not English. Also, they do not study English properly.

The only writing practices that the students carry out are our homework, classwork, and project work. Apart from that, they do not do any kind of writing. Though they were taught the etiquette of writing, students do not seem to take interest even when confronted by the teachers. According to Tshomo et al. (2018, p. 03), "While there is no research conducted in the Bhutanese context, anecdotal evidence indicates that writing in general and spelling errors, in particular, are a common problem amongst Bhutanese students."

When interrogated by the teachers on why they are not doing it, the majority of the students state that they do not like writing. The task is too complex and tedious. Even when the students are asked to write essays and any writing piece demanded by the teachers, they go to the internet and copy. The easy availability of technology has made it all the easier for the students. These habits have generally affected the students' writing skills; first, they are not interested in writing, and second, they outsource it to online websites.

Aims / Objective

The objectives of this Action Research were:

- a. Creating awareness and providing basic skills in journaling.
- b. Improving the writing habits of students through journaling.
- c. Facilitating reflection through expressed feelings about their educational practices.
- d. Enhancing writing skills through constant training.

Overarching Question:

Can daily journaling help class eleven students enhance their writing skills in English?

Sub-questions:

1. Is there any difference in students' writing habits before and after the intervention?
2. Is there any difference in students' perceived sense of writing ability before and after the intervention?
3. What is the student's perception of general knowledge of journal writing?
4. Are there positive impacts of journal writing on students' written performance?

Material and Methods

LHSS has emphasized journaling for around three to four years, led by the English Department. It has now become one of the academic programs of the school. That is why all the students will have some ideas on journal writing, except the eleventh-grade students who have newly joined. Hence, the eleventh-grade students were chosen for the study. The planning and preparation began in February 2021. Then the study was initiated as soon as eleventh-grade students joined the school in April.

Before the survey, an essay writing test of 200 to 250 words (Appendix 1) was conducted to assess the writing skills of eleventh-grade students before any intervention. Then baseline data were collected through survey questionnaires (N=151) from all the eleventh-grade students. These data helped to reflect on the writing habits, knowledge of journaling, and expected impacts of journaling among the respondents. After gathering

baseline data, intervention strategies were administered to students for six months starting from May (July was excluded due to examinations and summer vacation). The second writing test was conducted in the first week of November, followed by the gathering of post-intervention data through post-survey questionnaires (N=151). Similarly, post-intervention data could determine the difference in the students' perceptions of journaling and their writing habits after the intervention.

Results and Discussion

Baseline Data Analysis and Findings

The survey questionnaire was based on a five-point Likert type scale ranging from 1=Never or rarely true of me; 2= Usually not true of me; 3=Somewhat true of me; 4=Usually true of me; 5=Always or almost true of me. There were 19 items (Appendix 2): 4 items focused on general writing habits, four items on previous knowledge of journaling, and five items on the impacts of journaling. The composite scores of each theme were computed to generate the overall mean. These themes and the baseline data findings are discussed below.

Writing Habits of the Students

Findings from the baseline data indicated that eleventh-grade students rarely wrote, aside from tasks assigned by the teachers. They were found writing only in the classes when teachers monitored. According to Yaakob (2015, p. 39), "Of all interviewed students in Malaysia, 100% of them lack writing habits in their free time", which is very similar to the students of LHSS. Surprisingly, 2% of them mentioned that they write stories, poems, or songs, besides classroom activities, while 49% never write. Hence, it is evident that students lack writing habits and struggle to complete mandatory writing assignments.

Writing Skills, a Challenge for Students

Eleventh-grade students are expected to possess a decent vocabulary and the ability to identify simple errors and write a variety of sentence structures containing minimal mistakes. However, the pre-test score for essay writing showed that more than 76% of them are just average writers. Although around 10% are good writers, more than 11% are poor writers (scored less than 5 points out of 20).

It was further ascertained by the findings on the perceptions of their writing skills. More than 82% of the respondents agreed that they face difficulty in writing- they cannot use a variety of sentences, they are not able to punctuate their sentences appropriately, and they are unable to identify errors in their writings. These respondents' confidence level is

shallow; hence, they never attempted writing, fearing mistakes. However, 2% have mentioned that they are constantly practicing and are pretty confident in writing.

Lack of Knowledge of Journal Writing

There are different types of journal writings like a gratitude journal, dream journal, self-reflective journal, bible journal, and travel journal. Yet, the majority of the respondents are not aware of journal writing. Findings showed that more than 50% have little or no knowledge of journal writing, while only 30% have fair ideas. On the other hand, little more than 10% have good knowledge, but they have never journaled. Therefore, it gave enough space to reflect and plan intervention measures.

Impacts of Journaling in Enhancing Writing Skills

There is no doubt that consistent journal writing will have a positive impact on enhancing the writing performance of the students. The findings from the baseline data validated an earlier study that journal writing can be an effective learning tool for developing students' critical literacy, writing skills, and creative expression (Salem, 2007). More than 92% of the respondents agreed that journal writing would positively impact their writing skills. However, 1% felt journal writing would not positively impact written performance.

Intervention Strategies

Step 1: Provided ideas on journal writing and sharing its benefits

The students were given a presentation on how they could maintain a journal. The exhibition also discussed the benefits of keeping a journal, focusing on psychological well-being and writing skills. The English teachers provided more creative ways to keep a journal for the students in their lessons.

Step 2: Maintained a journal book and wrote daily

Students were encouraged to log into their journals every day. Teachers went through the students' journals every week to ensure that they were making an entry every day, complimenting when the students were putting effort into their journals and providing extra support when the students were slacking off.

Step 3: Teachers observed their writings

Teachers observed the quality of the student's writing and corrected the idiosyncrasies present in their writings. Teachers provided suggestions to the students on how to improve their writing, both for journaling and other aspects of the language. Further, teachers maintained daily observation notes of students' improvement.

Step 4: Follow-up and evaluation

Language teachers provided the necessary comments and guidance. They also evaluated the writings and the quality of the journal.

Post Intervention Data Findings

Findings of the post-intervention data are discussed based on the four research questions. These questions are answered through data gathered from the survey questionnaires, observations, and test scores. During the intervention phase, with the help of the English department, language teachers kept notes of the students' writing practices, daily journaling, and any other challenges. Then, these data were triangulated to answer each of the four research questions.

Is there any Difference in Students' Writing Habits Before and After the Intervention?

After implementing intervention strategies, students' writing habits improved significantly (Figure 1). In the initial period of the intervention phase, each notebook was provided, and students were made to start their journals, making entries on daily activities. In the beginning, students had a tough time scribbling even a complete sentence, but gradually, everyone developed a passion for writing (Observation Notes, October 15, 2021).

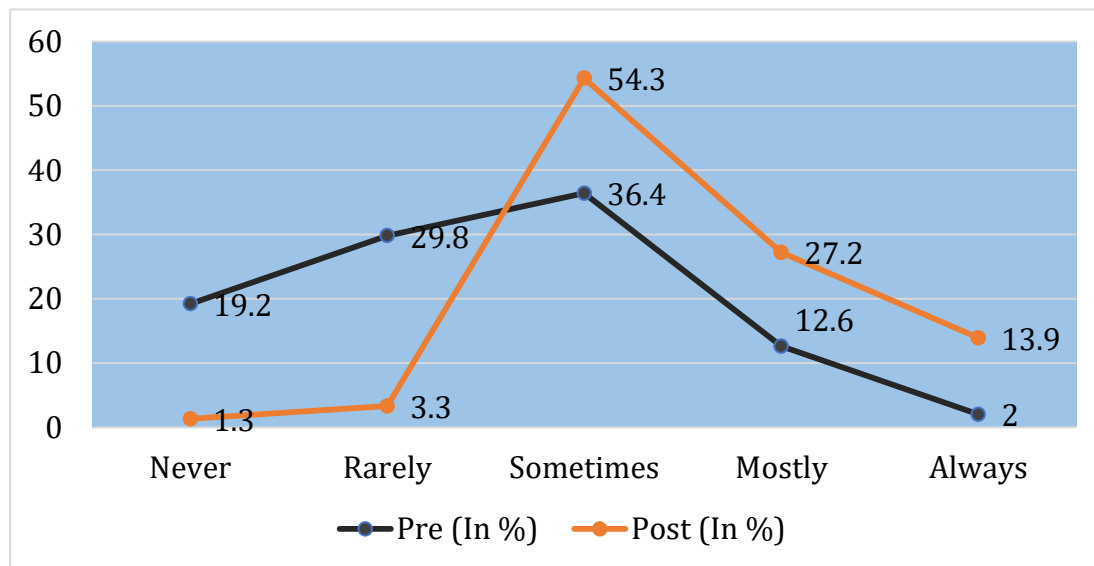


Figure 1. Pre- and Post-Survey Results of the Writing Habits of the Students

Is any Difference in Students' Perceived Sense of Writing Ability Before and After the Intervention?

Before implementing intervention strategies, students lacked writing skills, and their confidence level in writing was also shallow. During the intervention phase, which lasted about six months, everyone wrote daily in their own words about how they felt, starting from when they woke up till they went to bed. This consistency developed writing ability where 93% felt their writing competence was enhanced from 47% before the intervention. This action research confirms the earlier findings of Graham (2003, as cited in Farrah, 2012) that journal writing helps students develop confidence and competence in their writing and perceive themselves as writers. Moreover, daily journaling helped me to complete other written assignments such as essay writing, report writing, memo writing, and project works. For instance, three students in class XI Arts would take hours to write a paragraph, but now, after journaling daily, they can write three sections in ten to fifteen minutes. Except for a few grammatical errors, the confidence and flow have significantly improved (Observation note, October 29, 2021).

What is the Level of Students' Perception of General Knowledge of Journal Writing?

Students did not maintain journals because most did not have clear ideas about journaling. Hence, it is imperative to create awareness and provide opinions on the process of journal writing. After implementing intervention strategies, their knowledge of journaling has risen considerably (Figure 2).

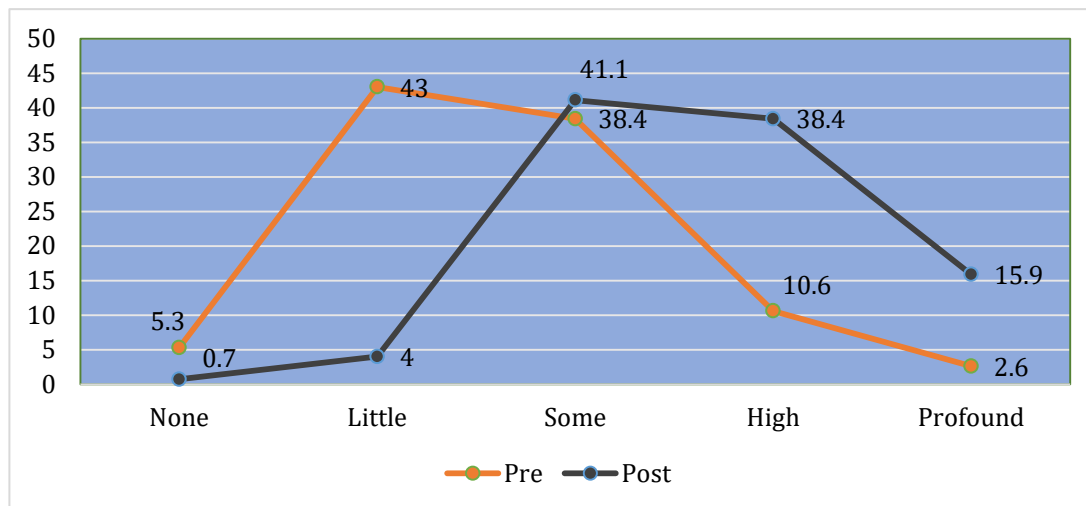


Figure 2. Pre- and Post-Survey Results of the General Knowledge of Journal Writing

Are There Positive Impacts of Journal Writing on Students' Written Performance?

After the rigorous practice and serious interventions, a similar second essay (of 200 to 250 words) writing test was conducted to determine if there were any improvements in their writing competency. The papers were evaluated based on the same criteria (Appendix 2). As indicated by the result, their performance had significantly improved (Table 1).

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Students' Pre- and Post-Academic Tests Score

Mark Range	Pre-Test (In %)	Post-Test (In %)
0 to 5 (Poor)	10.59	1.98
5.5 to 10 (Average)	76.05	38.05
10.5 to 15 (Very Good)	9.94	50.96
15.5 to 20 (Excellent)	3.42	9.01

Besides test performance, unusual huge articles contributed to the Dzongkhag magazine for 114th National Day were eleventh-grade students. By the later phase of the intervention period, most students were seen having separate creative writing works. One of the students has written more than ten reflective essays based on classroom instances and COVID-19 situations (Observation note, October 4, 2021). Therefore, reflective journal writing enables students to write, not constrained by the topic in their texts or any other personal experiences they have undergone (Farrah, 2012). Hence, it is evident that journal writing has positively impacted students' written performance.

Conclusion

The English language is the medium of instruction in Bhutanese schools. All the subjects are taught in English, except Dzongkha. However, English writing habits and language competency are a concern. According to Choeda et al. (2012), despite English being used as the medium of instruction in schools for decades, Bhutanese society expressed doubts about the quality of education, particularly about the English language and writing skills of students starting from the late 1990s. This action research also indicated that students generally lack writing habits, resulting in poor written skills. Even teachers hardly write beside their mandatory tasks. When they were students, they were never taught to write journals as well. Despite the noticeable benefits of journaling, it is challenging, too. Therefore, this action research on journal writing has been an excellent experience and proved to help enhance the written performance of the students.

LHSS initiated journal writing as part of the English performance enhancement measures, but its impact was never studied. Hence, this action research was intended to find out the effects of journal writing on students' written performance. Its result revealed positive impacts with some challenges in the beginning. During the initial intervention phase, students were observed facing some difficulties such as: how to begin and what to mention, and they were worried about sentence structures. This is similar to the earlier findings of Hiemstra (2001) in the context of adult and continuing education in the United States where students typically faced an obstacle in not knowing what to mention and what to do next. Therefore, it is crucial to understand that students require constant support and monitoring until it becomes a part of their habit.

For the first few months of the intervention phase, the physical verification had to be done in their journal book, and had to make the students write in front of the teachers. It was because students lacked writing habits, as revealed by baseline findings. However, the motivation was established from an earlier study by Mettaningrum et al., (2013). They found that one excellent way to practice writing, even before students begin composing essays, is to keep a daily journal. Journaling is an activity where students can always write wherever they go. Other studies also confirmed that writing journals would help students develop the habit of thinking on paper and show them how ideas can be discovered in writing.

After implementing intervention strategies for about six months, findings indicate that students are more motivated and confident in writing. Their journal books are filled with reflections on daily activities, and other related topics learned in the class. The result of the post-intervention test also showed that their writing skills had been enhanced. Moreover, journal writing was found to be one of the effective ways to develop writing habits where students can express their thoughts and feelings without worrying about spelling and grammar. This consistent practice was also found efficient in improving vocabularies and structures.

Recommendations

Had it been initiated earlier, there would have been a more positive effect on the student's writing skills. This is the conclusion of this action research. Students should be encouraged to start journaling from the primary classes, reflecting on their daily activities. This study found that those students who have already practiced journaling are comparatively better at articulating their thoughts and performed better in written tests. The six months of interventions have narrowed the gap of their earlier practices, and almost all the eleventh-grade students have performed equally well in the post-test. Therefore, journal writing has not only enhanced writing skills but has also motivated and boosted their confidence.

Future researchers could study the impacts of journal writing on reading comprehension and how they complement each other. The researchers could also focus on the effects of journaling in the earlier stages of schooling, as it was found challenging for XI students to develop writing habits.

Competing interests

Lhuentse Dzongkhag Education Office has financially supported all the researchers to motivate and promote research culture. We have also received the fund for this study, but there has been no negative influence on our works and study. Education Office has been very supportive and encourages more researchers. Therefore, the funding agency does not have any objection to publishing in JEAR; rather, it is the proudest moment for all of us.

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Authors' Biography

Mr Dorji Nidup is working as the Principal of Lhuentse Higher Secondary school. He has served in education for more than 20 years AND OVER a decade as a Principal.

Mr Yenten Ningtob is working as the Vice Principal of Lhuentse Higher Secondary School. He has been in the teaching service for around 14 years.

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