

Exploring The Effectiveness of Response Journal Writing in Middle School

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ABSTRACT

The present study compares school notebook writing and response journal writing in middle school. The study highlights the effectiveness of response journal writing as a medium for enhancing writing skills. This study could be of significance in offering insights for understanding the impact of the audience and the purpose of the writing.

KEY WORDS: Response Journal, School Notebook Sample, Voice, Audience, Ownership

INTRODUCTION

Learning to write is a significant educational goal. As a fundamental objective of schooling, writing is emphasized as a primary focus in school instruction and curriculum. A considerable emphasis is placed on writing activities in everyday classroom teaching and assessments. Since writing is a crucial component of literacy, it plays a significant role in every classroom subject.

Although writing is a core component of the school curriculum, many students still fear it. Despite spending most of their time in school engaged primarily in writing, students often feel incompetent in expressing their ideas. Kumar (1994) highlighted that in classrooms, children are taught writing only as a means of copying. In classrooms, when children are asked to compose sentences, they look to *the teacher to tell them what to write* (p. 54). A few research studies have also highlighted the disappointing performance of children in writing (Gerde et al., 2012; Rietdijk et al., 2018).

Considering the poor state of writing in our classrooms, it is often suggested that authentic writing opportunities should be created in the classroom. Children should have chances to express their views and thoughts in writing. However, a question arises about how to implement such suggestions. It is often debated how children can be encouraged to engage creatively with writing in a traditional classroom context and how to design writing opportunities that allow children to explore writing in its true essence.

This research study addresses the aforementioned questions. It focuses on the use of response journals in language classrooms. The paper is organized into three sections. The first part discusses the study's methodology. The second part highlights the findings. The final section shares important educational implications.

METHODOLOGY

The data for the research study were collected from a government school in New Delhi. The Principal assigned a middle school class to conduct the research. Data were collected from the same classroom over a period of two months. There were a total of thirty students in the class. All the children in the classroom were participants in the research study.

The data collection process consists of two primary phases: the observation phase and the response journal writing phase. During the observation phase, observations were made in ten Hindi language classes, with a primary focus on the types of writing assignments the students completed.

Following this, the response journal writing phase commenced, taking place in a designated middle school classroom during two consecutive periods each day. For the response journal session, a Hindi language story was shared with the students every day. It was followed by a writing task related to the story. Utilizing age-appropriate children's literature, students were assigned writing tasks framed as questions that motivated them to engage with the texts. They had ample chances to respond to these questions through different writing styles and language functions. A story was narrated, during which a series of pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading questions were asked. Subsequently, a variety of writing activities were conducted, including story extension, story mapping, character mapping, story sequencing, writing letters to the author or character, story framing, and dialogue writing. Students were asked to write their responses related to the story in their assigned personal response journal. Later, these response journals were collected and returned after providing appropriate teacher feedback. It is essential to note that teachers' feedback often involves a detailed response from the teacher after reading the student's writing. A total of twenty response journal sessions were conducted in this manner.

This study gathered two datasets. The first is derived from the school's Hindi notebook, which is a traditional writing piece. The second comprises entries from response journals. Both datasets were examined through various lenses, including ownership and authorial voice, language functions employed, writing formats used, feedback given to students in their notebooks, writing errors, and the progression of their writing from the first to the final day.

The school writing notebook samples and response journal samples were documented correctly. The process of first-level coding and pattern coding was employed to identify themes from the data (Miles et al., 2014).

The questions given to students for different types of writing are as follows:

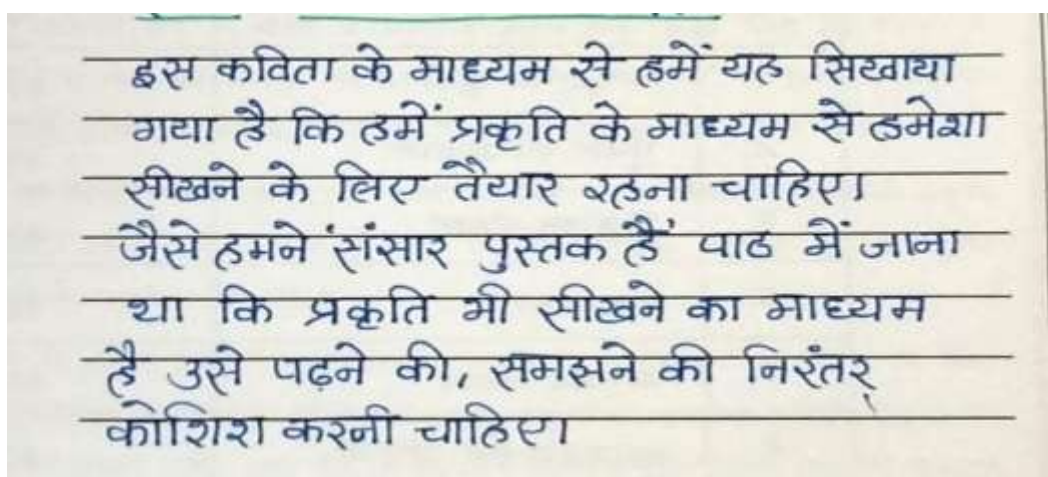
PREDICTIVE WRITING	PERSUASIVE WRITING	PERSONAL WRITING	SPECULATIVE WRITING	EXPOSITORY WRITING	NARRATIVE WRITING	DESCRIPTIVE WRITING
आपके विचार से लेखक ने इस कहानी का नाम जहाँ पहिचा है क्यों रखा होगा?	क्या होता बिलबासी जी जब अपनी पत्नी के गले से चाबी निकाल रहे थे तभी वो जाग जाती?	अगर आप ईरानी की जगह होते तो अपने पहले सिनेमा की क्या कहानी लिखते?	अगर महाराज ने विशेषज्ञों और साधु की जगह आपको बुलाया होता तो आप भ्रष्टाचार कहतम करने के लिए क्या सुझाव देते?	Worksheet on सिनेमा प्रेमचंद रविन्द्रनाथ ठाकुर (टैगोर) भीष्म साहनी	कल्पना करो की मेन की बलिदान की खबर आपको रेडियो पर सुनानी है। इसके लिए एक समाचार लिखकर तैयार करो बिल्कुल वैसे जैसे आप सुनाएंगे/बोलेंगे।	अगर आप ईरानी की जगह होते तो अपने पहले सिनेमा की क्या कहानी लिखते? Story framing of stories narrated.
कहानी को आगे बढ़ाओ और अपने मुताबिक इसका अंत करो।	अगर भिखारिन सेठ के पास पैसे जमा ना करती तो कहानी कैसे आगे बढ़ती?	आपके हिसाब से जिस प्रकार बिलबासी जी ने पैसे का प्रबंध किया क्या वह ठीक था?	अगर आप कहानी का लेखक होते तो कहानी का अंत कैसे करते?	Character mapping of characters of story		क्या आपके साथ भी ऐसा हुआ है या आपने अपने मित्र के साथ कोई मजाक किया हो जिसका बदला आप उनसे लेना चाहे या वो आपसे लेना चाहे जैसा कहानी में हुआ था?
सोचो अगर रहमत वापिस आ गया है तो क्या वह अपनी बेटों से मिल पाया होगा? आपका क्या मानना है?	क्या होता अगर बोधराज ना बदलता तो कहानी का अंत कैसे होता?	आप लेखक को पत्र लिखिए और कोई नए शीर्षक का सुझाव दीजिए।	अगर आप रायचरण की जगह होते तो क्या तुम फलन को अनुकूल बाबू को सौंप देते या कोई और रास्ता निकाल लेते?			ऐसी महिला जिन्होंने कोई संघर्ष किया हो उनके बारे में बताओ।
बच्चे वाली औरत के मुताबिक कहानी का अंत करो।		आपके अनुसार क्या तरीके हो सकते हैं जिनसे महिला सशक्तिकरण कर सकते हैं?	मान लो तुम लेखक के घर की एक गोरिया हो। अब अपनी साधी गोरिया को बताओ की तुम्हारे साथ उस घर में क्या क्या हुआ था?			क्या आपके साथ कभी ऐसा हुआ है की आपने कोई गलती की और उसका पछतावा आपको बाद में हुआ हो?

FINDINGS

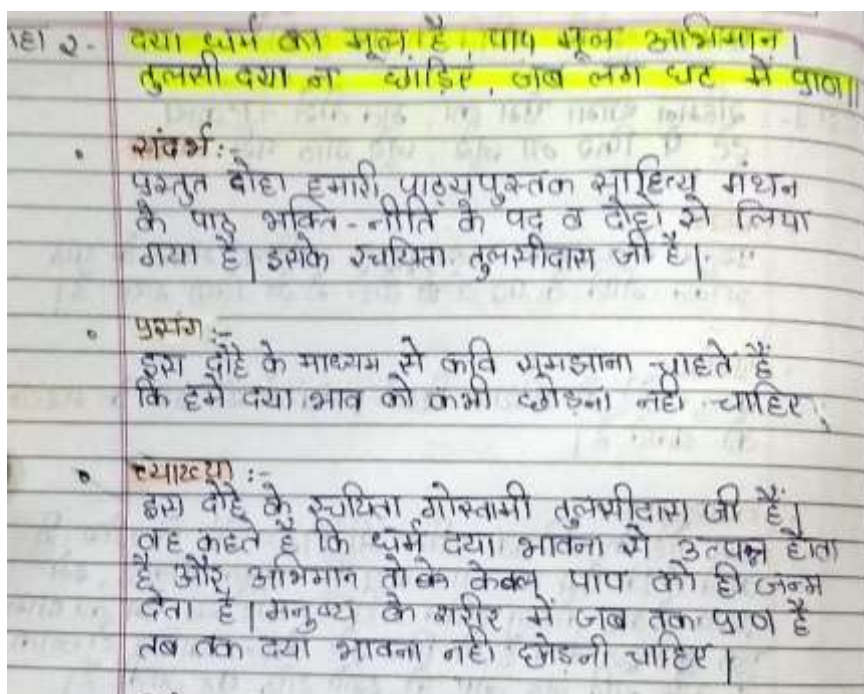
The data highlighted few significant findings about the writing in school notebooks and response journals. The main findings are shared below

I. School notebook samples

The school writing notebooks of students were analysed. It was noted that mostly similar written work is done in all notebooks. It implies that the work is being copied from the same source. Mostly, it was the work written by teachers on the blackboard that students copied religiously. The type of written assignments in the notebooks was focused on textbook chapters. It mainly included assignments such as question-answer, difficult words, or handwriting practice from the textbook chapter. Further, none of the writing samples displayed key components of good writing such as voice, desire to convey, sense of audience and ownership (Graves, 1983; Kumar, 1994).



(School notebook sample # 1)



(School notebook sample # 2)

II. Response Journals

The response journals of students were collected and analysed. The main findings are shared below:

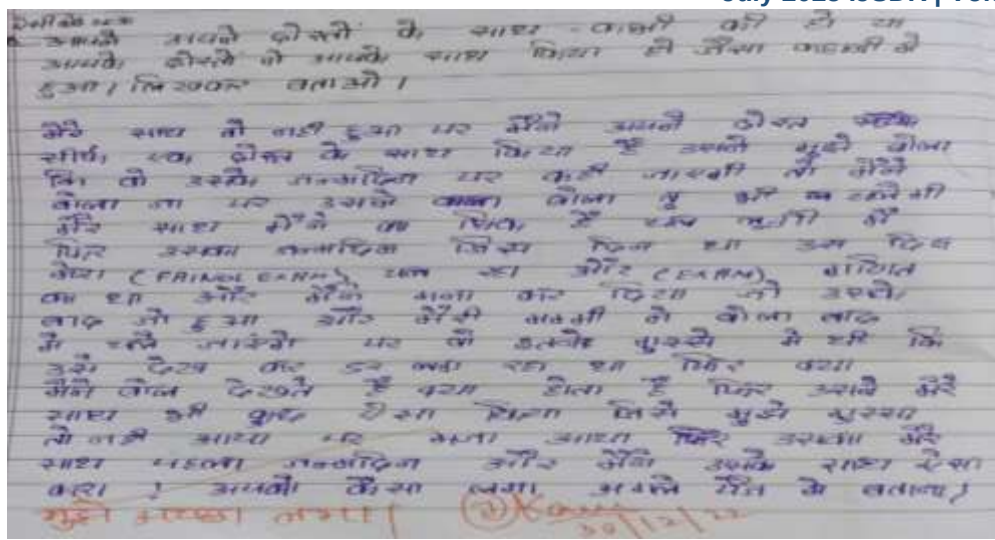
a) Ownership and Voice

Both voice and ownership are closely interlinked concepts. Voice emerges in writing when children discuss topics deeply connected to their lives. Graves (1983) described Voice as the dynamo of the writing process. Voice appears in writing when students express their own experiences, feelings, and concerns. When the topic is closely related to a child's life, voice emerges naturally. The concept of ownership (Atwell, 1987) is strongly tied to the idea of voice. In the response journal, it was observed that children have written extensively on the topics related to their lives. Ownership was noted in several writing samples. Voice was also noted in the response journal sample.

b) Sense of Audience

Kumar (1994) described the sense of audience as an important factor for writing. The understanding that 'my writing will be read by others' makes the writer to write keeping in mind the perspective of audience. Hence, writing is used as a medium of communication between writer and reader.

In all the collected response journal samples, a sense of audience awareness was noted. Students were aware that their writing will be read by someone. Hence they tried to communicate to the teacher or with others through their writing.



(A sample from the response journal highlighting sense of audience)

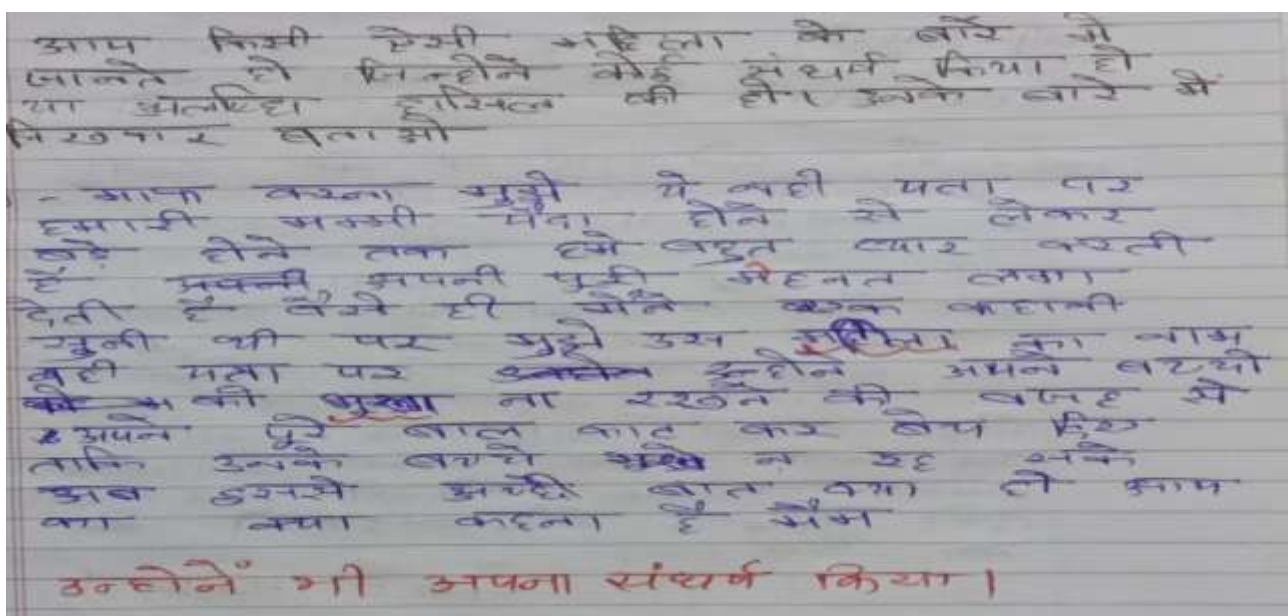
c) Language

The language used in the response journal was expressive and straightforward. The children tried to express their ideas in writing clearly. The children used no artificial vocabulary or terminology. A clear sense of voice was evident while reading the students' writing.

d) Desire to convey

It is a human tendency to share one's emotions, feelings, and concerns. We want to discuss the issues or incidents that affect our lives. As humans, we have a desire to convey (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983; Kumar, 1994). Therefore, practices such as morning messages, free writing, and response journals, which enable students to express themselves through personal writing, should be integrated into the daily classroom routine.

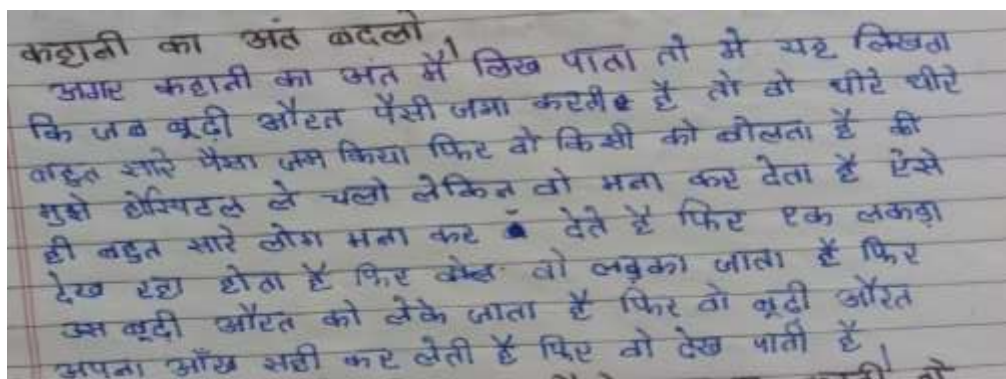
In the response journal entries, we noted several instances where the student attempted to express his ideas. The desire to convey was evident in the student's response journal samples.



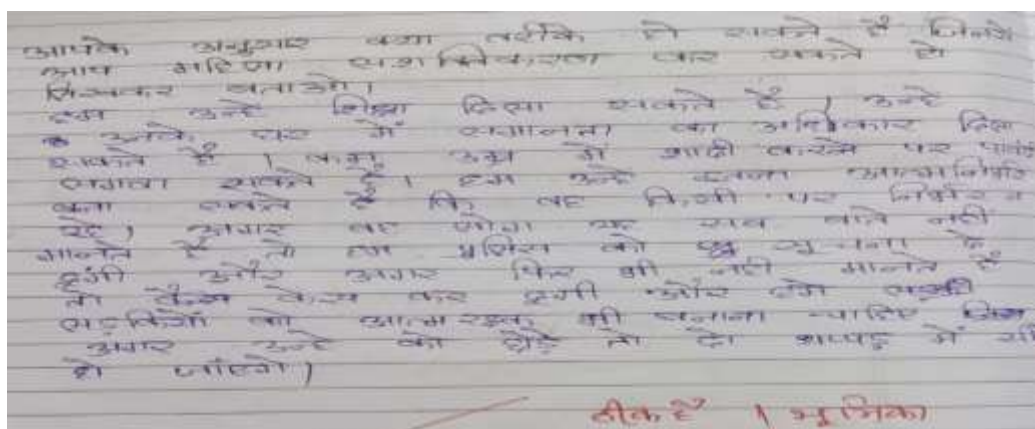
(A sample from the response journal highlighting the desire to convey)

e) Functions of language

Halliday (1975) has identified seven functions of language: instrumental, imaginative, regulatory, personal, informative, interactional, and heuristic. In response to journal assignments, we gave students tasks that focused on these functions. Students also well used these functions and expressed their thoughts and ideas.



(A sample of response journal expressing imaginative function of language)

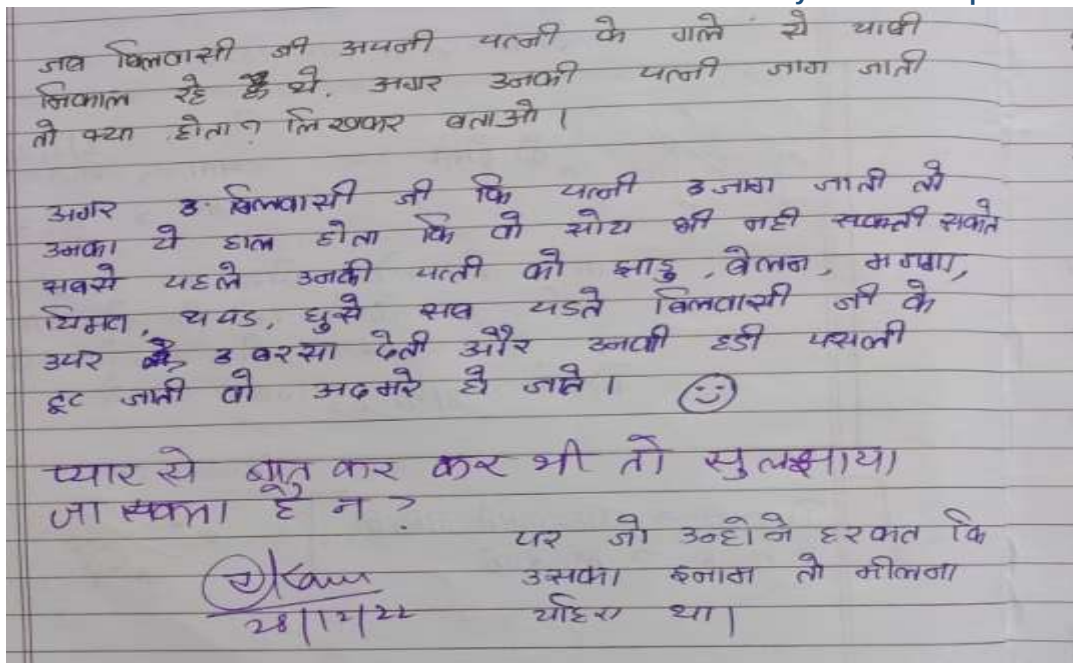


((A sample of response journal expressing informative function of language)

f) Feedback

Atwell (1987) described teachers' and audience responses as significant factors in developing children's writing. In a classroom, when students receive constructive feedback on their writing, they engage with writing freely. A positive response establishes the student's trust in the teacher. They learn that writing is not always for assessment, but writing is a medium to express and communicate.

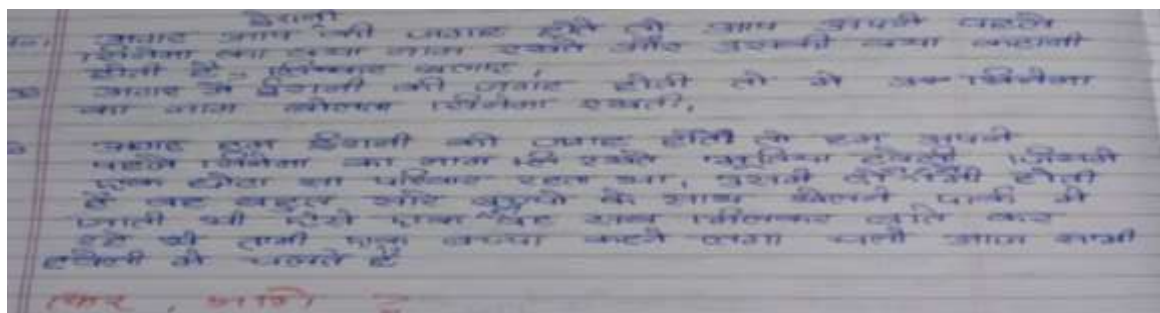
In response journal writing, students always received detailed feedback. They consistently seemed eager to read the feedback provided by their teachers. Many times, students also wrote their responses to the feedback given by their teachers. This highlighted how the response journal became a medium of communication between a teacher and her students.



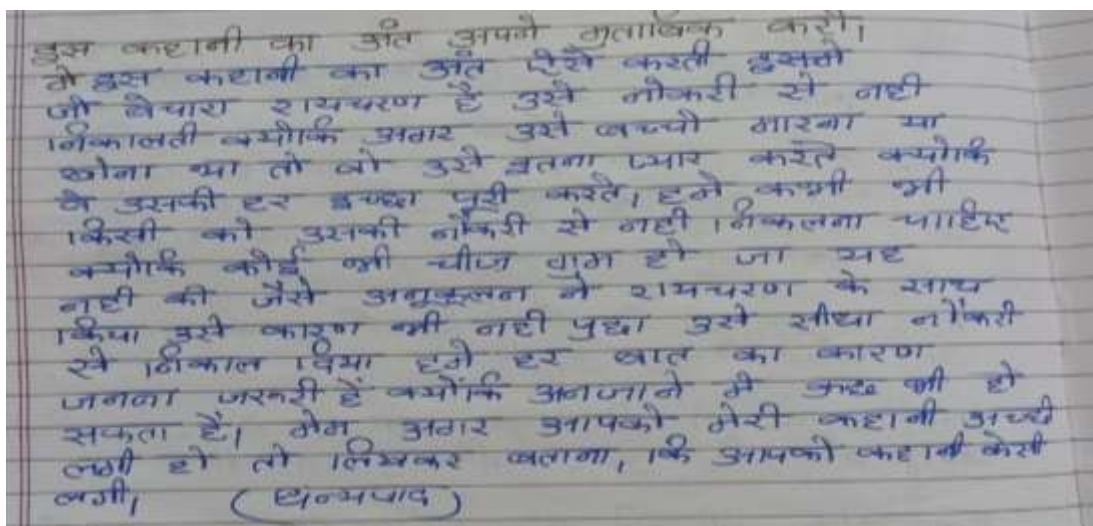
(A sample of response journal highlighting communication between teacher and a student)

g) Developmental progression

In the response journal entries, most students showed a developmental progression in writing quality. They demonstrated improvement in describing their ideas. Furthermore, it was noted that earlier students were more focused on formatting and mechanical errors in their writing (Kunwar, 2013). However, in later response journal sessions, they seemed to concentrate more on the content of their writing.



(Day 5– Response Journal Writing of student A)



(Day 16 – Response Journal Writing of student A)

ANALYSIS

The examination of school notebook samples reveals a concerning situation regarding writing instruction in our schools. In every traditional sample gathered from schools, it was clear that the topics and answers did not stem from the students. The topics were sourced from the syllabus, while the content was taken from guidebooks. This writing lacks individuality because students are not encouraged to express their own ideas. This trend of fostering uniform writers begins as early as pre-primary grades, actively discouraging students from engaging in self-reflection on their work. Teachers, through their limited feedback, ensure that all students' notebooks appear identical.

Writing involves expression and communication, rather than mere copying. We can only harness students' active energy when we allow them to delve into the functional and developmental aspects of writing. An overly mechanical approach has led to classrooms where one guidebook restricts around thirty-five bright, young, and creative minds.

Efforts have been made to involve students more deeply in the writing process by providing them with open avenues for self-expression through response journal writing. Students' writing showcased their unique voice, sense of ownership, and eagerness to share ideas in the response journals. Several important points were noted in response journal samples-

1. It enables students to reflect on their ideas expressed in the text, showcasing their voice and ownership.
2. It motivates students to employ various language functions, including personal, imaginative, instructional, and informative aspects.
3. It promotes the incorporation of diverse writing styles in the classroom, such as persuasive, personal, descriptive, narrative, speculative, and predictive writing.
4. Students engage more deeply with the teacher by writing in response journals
5. Significant improvements in the quality of writing were noted in the response journals.
6. Students want to express their ideas to the teacher, making response journal writing essential.

CONCLUSION

Recognizing the importance of response journals in enhancing students' writing, it is essential to incorporate them into every language classroom. Furthermore, it is necessary to expand children's access to literature in these settings. Literature is an invaluable tool for initiating response journal writing. Therefore, linking literature with response journals highlights the connection between reading and writing. Increased access to literature enriches a child's vocabulary, knowledge, and the overall quality of their writing. Consistently providing opportunities for response journal writing enables students to engage with writing as a true form of expression.

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