

## *Using Personal Diaries to Improve Students' Academic Writing Skills in English*

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### **Abstract**

Most students in Japan leave high school having been exposed to a wide range of grammatical structures and vocabulary items. However, analysis of new first-year university students' written reports showed a marked lack of multi-clause sentences, limited vocabulary use, and confusion about how to structure paragraphs. Student interviews revealed that many had received little practice of writing beyond the sentence level in their previous English education, and some said that they were unwilling to write extensively due to a perception of writing as "difficult" and "boring". This paper first outlines the research and rationale behind an attempt to rectify these problems. It then follows a case study in which students were asked to write a personal diary every week in order to gain more experience in producing longer pieces of writing. Students were graded on volume of output, and the teacher feedback focused on the content of the diary rather than on grammar, structure and spelling. The findings presented here (taken from discourse analysis and student questionnaire results) suggest that the experience of writing a diary in English can have positive effects on learners' willingness to produce longer pieces of academic writing. This leads to increased sentence complexity, a more varied vocabulary, and the ability to structure written reports more effectively.

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## **1. Context**

The Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Technology (MEXT) requires all students in junior and senior high school to learn English. Therefore the vast majority of students in Japan enter university after at least six years' L2 study in which the government-approved curriculum has exposed them to a wide range of grammatical structures and vocabulary items. The Ministry also places a strong emphasis on communicative ability (MEXT, 2011; MEXT, 2012); however, communication skill has often been criticised as being underdeveloped in Japanese education (Gorsuch, 1998), with “a strong preference for [...] linguistic knowledge over linguistic performance” (Law, 1995, p. 217). In spite of recent government recommendations to move away from traditional grammar-translation approaches, change has been slow (Koike and Tanaka, 1995, p. 24). Nishino and Watanabe (2009, p. 134) suggest that as students and teachers focus on entrance examinations with a heavy component of reading comprehension, “many secondary school English teachers may believe that detailed grammatical knowledge and intensive reading skills are crucial for Japanese secondary school learners,” at the expense of other skills. While this issue has been widely discussed with regard to students' oral communication (Tahira, 2012, p. 5), it may also impact negatively on their ability to communicate ideas effectively through writing.

The research described in this paper was conducted in the Business department at a private women's university in Tokyo. All students would spend at least one semester (during their second year) in the United States, so the first year English course is a four skills programme designed to prepare learners for the study abroad experience, in which they will be required to take Business content classes in an English-language environment.

## **2. Problems with Students' English Writing on Entering University**

Discourse analysis of 74 students' essays (on the topic of 'My English Learning Experiences') in the first week of university suggested that students' essay writing skills had not been fully developed in high school. The analysis, alongside follow-up interviews with the students, helped identify four major problems: a marked lack of multi-clause sentences, the inability to use paragraphs effectively, a reliance on only the most common vocabulary items, and an unwillingness to write extensively.

### **2.1. Lack of Multi-Clause Sentences**

While students used a wide variety of grammatical structures in the essays, individual sentences were often short, with only 15 percent of all sentences containing more than one clause. Single-clause sentences are not inherently problematic; however, when the essays were shown to third party readers, they expressed difficulty in understanding the writers' intentions and commented that many ideas appeared unconnected and undeveloped due to the lack of multi-clause sentences. For example, one student wrote:

*My host sister took me to school. I eat lunch with her classmates. They asked me many questons about Japan. I could answer in English. I was very very happy!*

This passage could have been made clearer by the simple addition of conjunctions, such as *and* or *so*. For example:

*My host sister took me to school and I ate lunch with her classmates. They asked me many questions about Japan and I could answer in English, so I was very, very happy!*

In the follow-up interview, this student showed awareness of how conjunctions could make her writing clearer, but she said that she was worried about making mistakes in writing longer sentences and combining different grammar points, so she had decided to keep each structure separate. This sentiment was echoed in interviews with other students.

### **2.2. Inability to Use Paragraphs Effectively**

A further issue affecting the students' ability to express ideas clearly was a limited awareness of how to use paragraphs. Two problems were prevalent. The first, in 58 percent of essays, was a disregard for paragraphs altogether. For example:

*I like English very much. Last year I homestay for 2 weeks in Canada. My English was bad first. But my host family was kind. Soon I could speak more. It was fun. My host sister took me to school. I eat lunch with her classmates. They asked me many questons about Japan. I could answer in English. I was very very happy! But my test score is not good. Very low! I think test English is diffrent. I will go to Boston in sophomore. I want to speak English with foreign peple. Also I want to make good test score. Please advice me teacher! Thank you!*

A second common feature (in 29 percent of essays) was a tendency to treat each sentence as a new paragraph. For example:

*I studied English for 6 years.*

*Its difficult for me.*

*In junior high school we sang songs in English.*

*But in high school we studied hard for entrance exams.*

*It was so hard.*

*I like watching movies in English.*

*Especially I like Disney Pixar for example TOY STORY.*

*I want to watch without Japanese captions.*

In interviews, almost all students were aware of the basic concept of paragraphs. However, they expressed uncertainty about exactly *how* to use them, and more than half of the students said that they had not needed to consider paragraph construction previously as they had never written longer essays in English. Their written output in high school had been almost exclusively at the sentence level, usually responding to test questions with single-sentence answers.

### ***2.3. Over-Reliance on Common Vocabulary***

The student interviews showed that most of their high school English study was focused on reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary acquisition. Placement tests before classes began had a strong reading focus and scores suggested that students were familiar with a wide range of both high and low frequency vocabulary. Despite this, the vocabulary used in the essays was narrow, mostly limited to the commonest words. In fact, fewer than two percent of items came from outside the most frequent 1000 word level (West, 1953). This may have been in part due to the familiar subject matter (discussing personal language learning experiences); however, it also pointed to a limited active vocabulary that could impair students' ability to express more complex ideas.

### ***2.4. Unwillingness to Write Extensively***

The final problem identified by the initial analysis was perhaps the most fundamental: the students appeared unwilling to produce longer pieces of work in English. Before writing these essays, students had been given instructions to write at least 200 words. However, the average length of the submitted work was just 162 words. In interviews, almost every student expressed the view that writing essays was "boring" or "difficult". Additionally, more than 60 percent said that they had received little

practice in extended writing in their previous English education. Storch and Hill (2008) stated that the lack of opportunity to produce extended writing could lead to a lack of improvement in composition skills. Therefore this issue had serious implications regarding the students' chance of future progress. If they continued producing only the bare minimum, then this would limit the possibility for improvement in all aspects of writing.

### **3. Reasons for Concern**

Clearly, the problems outlined above may prevent the learners from expressing their ideas articulately in writing. This is of particular concern as all the students in this research would attend university in the United States in the second year and would be expected to submit written reports in English; therefore these issues may impact negatively on their study abroad experience. Additionally, interviews with the students suggested that the problems were connected to learner confidence. Students were *aware* of many of the issues, but they were reticent to try and address problems independently; for example, using conjunctions to construct multi-clause sentences, or employing less common vocabulary to discuss ideas more clearly and deeply. Instead the learners preferred to choose the easier option – short sentences, the most familiar vocabulary, fewer words – in order to avoid making mistakes. If risk-taking is a characteristic of a successful language learner (Rees-Miller, 1993, p. 682), then such a lack of confidence could lead to difficulties in all aspects of English, not only writing. On a more practical level, in the limited class time available to study academic writing, students and teachers were forced to devote their efforts to basic sentence and paragraph structure, rather than on more technical aspects of essay construction that would be important when studying abroad.

### **4. Addressing the Problem**

Based on these preliminary research findings, it became clear that the course needed a component that would encourage students to write without fear of making mistakes. In order to encourage longer pieces of work and improve writing fluency, it was decided to ask students to write personally rather than about any given subject. By allowing students to choose their own topics, it was hoped, the writing process would be more fun and less “boring” or “difficult”.

The next question was exactly *how* to proceed. Following discussions with colleagues, three platforms were proposed for students to express themselves in writing:

First, requiring students to use social network sites (SNS), such as Facebook or Twitter, to correspond with the class and teacher in English. While this form of communication is currently very popular and can be useful for authentic language practice, *requiring* learners to use SNS could have implications on privacy – not all students wish to join such sites. Additionally, SNS tends to encourage short posts and responses (Twitter, for example, limits posts to 140 characters), so it does not address the issue of low volume of output.

The second option was an email blog between student, teacher and selected classmates. This would be more private, and more suited to extended writing than SNS. Fellner and Apple (2004) found that the complexity of grammar and vocabulary as well as writing fluency (words per minute) improved after seven days of supervised blog writing. However, some teachers had experienced difficulties with such an activity in the past, stating that students had often lost interest after an initial surge of enthusiasm.

Finally, personal diaries (also known as dialogue journals) were considered. Holmes and Moulton (1997) stated that the use of dialogue journals can encourage authentic interaction and help develop learners' grammar awareness, and Nassaji and Cumming (2000) discovered that journals can help build the complexity of students' writing. A diary is of course very similar to a blog; however, it differs in that it provides a tangible, physical record of students' progress, allowing teacher and learner to easily check any gains made over the semester. Therefore it was decided to pilot the use of writing personal diaries in order to improve English writing skills.

## **5. Implementation**

For this research, the test group comprised 48 students from two classes selected to complete diaries for homework every week. A control group of 26 students did *not* write diaries. Instead, they completed worksheets for homework, explicitly connected to the language studied in the syllabus. In all other respects, both groups followed the same curriculum, including the 200-word essay in week 1, plus 500-word academic essays in weeks 7 and 13 of the 15-week semester.

The teacher asked each student in the test group to buy a notebook that would be used exclusively for the diary. This was intended to keep it separate from other class notes and homework, distancing it from explicit language learning. The students were encouraged to write about any topic they wished: recent life events, favourite things,

news stories, problems, anything that they felt comfortable discussing. They were then requested to submit the diary to the teacher every Tuesday, with at least two completed entries per week. There was no specified word count; however, students were told that they would be graded on effort rather than grammar or spelling. Furthermore, the teacher would not correct or comment on technical aspects of language, but instead respond to the *content* of the diary with comments or questions. He would then return the diaries to the students each Friday.

## **6. Results: Discourse Analysis**

The four problems identified at the beginning of semester were: the lack of multi-clause sentences, the inability to use paragraphs, a narrow active vocabulary, and an unwillingness to write extensively. Therefore, data collection and analysis was focused on these areas.

### ***6.1. Multi-clause sentences***

In week 1, the students writing diaries used more than one clause in only 17 percent of their sentences. By week 9, this had more than doubled to 36 percent of sentences, and by the last diary entry (week 14), 42 percent of sentences used more than one clause, suggesting increased grammatical complexity in students' writing.

Next we will compare diary writers' performance with that of the control group who did not write diaries. All students wrote the 200-word short essay in week 1 and 500-word academic essays in weeks 7 and 13.

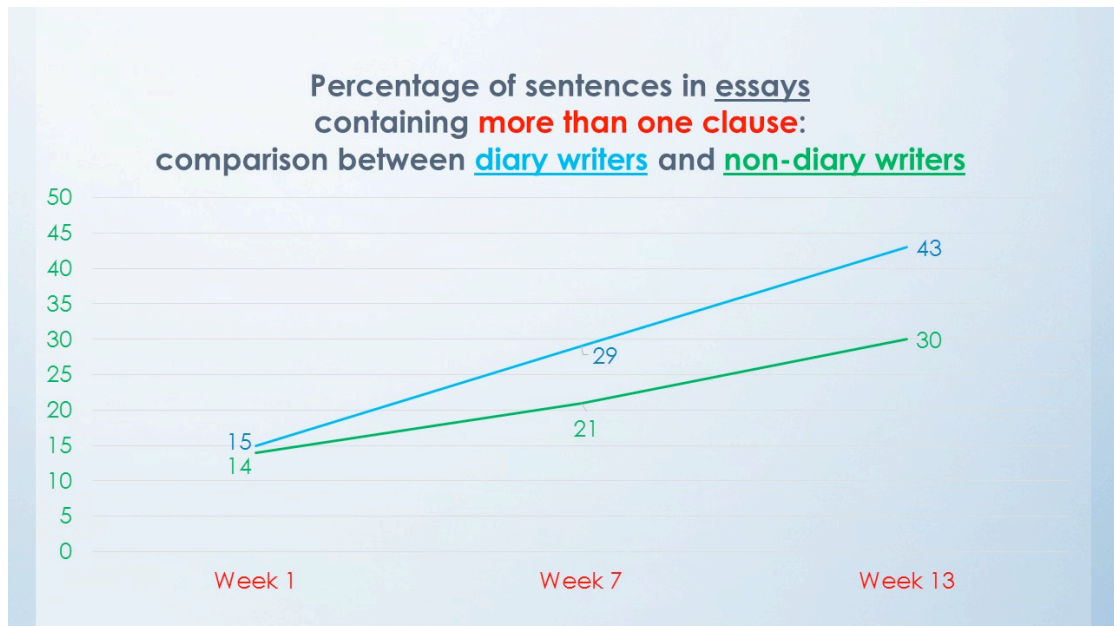


Figure 1

This chart shows that in both groups (those who wrote diaries, and those who did not) there was an increase in the percentage of sentences containing multiple clauses. However, while the percentage more than doubled for non-diary writers (14 percent in week 1 to 30 percent in week 13), students who wrote diaries saw an even sharper increase – almost threefold – from 15 percent in week 1, to 43 percent in week 13. This suggests a willingness among diary writers to use more complex structure, connecting ideas more effectively, thus making essays more cohesive.

### ***6.2. Paragraphs***

The level of success in paragraph writing was more difficult to measure. Overall, there still appeared uncertainty about when it was appropriate to start a new paragraph. However, diary writers showed some improvement throughout the semester. Only two students (4.16 percent) failed to use paragraph breaks in their final essays in week 13, and none of them made the error of beginning each sentence on a new line. Conversely, in the group that had not written diaries, five students (19.23 percent) did not use any paragraph breaks in the week 13 essay, and two (7.69 percent) still started each sentence on a new line, in spite of repeated reminders not to do so.

### ***6.3. Vocabulary Range***

In the test group, only 1.8 percent of words in diaries used in week 1 came from outside West's (1953) most frequent 1000-word level. This more than doubled by week 5 (4.1 percent) and quadrupled by week 14, when 7.5 percent of words came from outside the most frequent 1000 words.



In academic essays, diary writers made similar gains in their breadth of vocabulary. The following graph compares the performance of diary writers with non-diary writers.

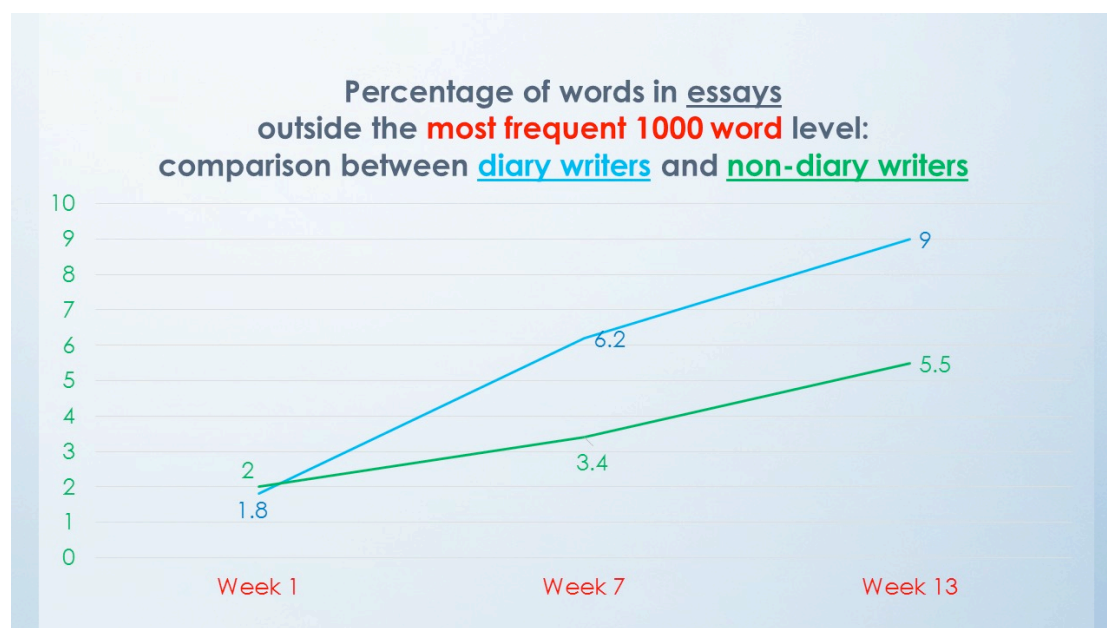


Figure 2

This chart shows a sharp increase in the use of less frequent words by the diary writers, while gains by non-diary writers are less marked. As all of the essays were on the same topic across both groups, it may be surmised that diary writing can help broaden students' active vocabulary in academic writing.

#### 6.4. Willingness to Write Extensively

There were concerns among teachers that students' initial enthusiasm in writing diaries would decrease as the semester progressed, resulting in shorter or incomplete diary entries. However, the opposite was the case: the length of work steadily increased, from an average of 38 words per entry (w.p.e.) in week 1, to 56 w.p.e. in week 5, 70 w.p.e. in week 9, and 98 w.p.e. in week 14. These results suggested not only that students were motivated to keep writing the diary, but also that they were willing to extend themselves more and more.

These gains translated to the students' academic writing. In weeks 7 and 13, students were asked to write "500-word" essays. The following graph shows how diary writers and non-diary writers compared.



Figure 3

While non-diary writers’ word counts consistently fell well short of the requested 500 words, this chart shows that diary writers wrote longer academic essays on average. By week 13, they wrote an average of nearly 10 percent more than what was asked of them, suggesting an increased willingness to write compared to those who did not keep diaries.

## 7. Results: Student Questionnaires

The data gleaned from discourse analysis were very encouraging. Additionally, informal interviews, as well as some of the diary entries themselves, suggested that students’ attitudes toward the diaries were positive. To gauge learner reaction in more detail, at the end of the semester, 33 students who had written diaries completed questionnaires about their experience. Following Dornyei’s (2003, p. 18) edict that less is often more, the questionnaire was kept short, consisting of just four parts. The first two (7.1 and 7.2, below) were scaled response questions containing five categories: *Strongly Agree*, *Agree*, *Don’t know*, *Disagree*, and *Strongly Disagree*. The third question (7.3) was a closed *Yes/No/Don’t Know* question. Finally, students were asked to give comments on any good or bad points of writing an English diary during the course (7.4).

### 7.1. *Did you enjoy writing the diary?*

Eleven students (33.33 percent) responded ‘strongly agree’ to the question of whether they enjoyed writing the diary. A further 21 students (63.63 percent) responded

‘agree’, and just one student responded ‘don’t know’. No student disagreed. This showed that writing was no longer seen as “boring” or “difficult” by these students (as had been indicated in interviews at the beginning of the semester), and had instead become something enjoyable. As learner enjoyment has been shown to be closely related to motivation in language learning (Wang, 2008; Noels 2003), this was a hugely significant development.

### ***7.2. Did the diary help to improve your English writing?***

The results for this question were similarly encouraging. Fourteen students (42.42 percent) responded ‘strongly agree’ – the diary helped improve their English writing – while 16 students (48.48 percent) responded ‘agree’. The remaining 3 students (9.09 percent) chose ‘don’t know’. Research has shown that awareness of progress can lead to enhanced self-efficacy, thus improving future learning (Schunk, 2001), so it is especially gratifying that the majority of students in this study could notice the beneficial effects of the diary writing activity for themselves. This may facilitate further gains in their studies ahead.

### ***7.3. Will you continue writing an English diary in the future?***

Again, the student response to question 3 was positive. Twenty students (60.60 percent) responded ‘yes’, they will continue writing a diary in the future, with the remainder saying ‘don’t know’. If the activity can encourage continued independent learning, then students have the opportunity for further improvement, even after the course has ended. This response also makes it clear that many students feel comfortable writing in English, which is a markedly different attitude to that seen in student interviews at the beginning of the semester.

### ***7.4. Please give comments on any good or bad points of writing an English diary in this course.***

In 33 questionnaires, 26 respondents wrote comments. Within these comments, there were 35 statements in total (some students writing more than one statement). Of these statements, 27 can be classified as positive, and eight statements may be deemed negative. The vast majority of positive statements (21 out of 27) referred to the teacher’s written comments about the content of the diary; for example, “I look forward to your comments every time.” Four positive statements referred more to general enjoyment (“It was fun to write a diary!”). Of the negative statements, all eight of them expressed a desire for more teacher correction of grammar or spelling; for example, “I’d like you to feedback not only on content but also spelling and grammar!!” “I’d like you to check grammar because I write similar contents.”

## **8. Evaluation and Reflection**

The results of this study showed that personal diary writing can have positive effects on learners' attitudes towards writing, leading to measurable gains over their peers who did not write diaries. As well as the benefits outlined above, the teacher of the course noted further positive outcomes. Through the dialogue process, it was possible for the teacher to learn more about the students' lives, enabling him to tailor classes towards their needs or interests. For example, after many students had written about seeing a popular film, a class was designed around some of the issues raised in the movie. Additionally, the diary allowed students the opportunity to request and receive one-to-one tuition not always possible in a class of 20 or more students.

Students used the diary to ask for advice on how to improve listening or speaking skills and how to study for TOEIC. One student was worried about an upcoming English speech contest, so the teacher offered a list of public speaking tips. Another learner was very shy in class but wrote about her life with great eloquence and humour; through the diary response, the teacher suggested she told some of these stories to her classmates, and she soon gained confidence not only in her writing but also in her speaking. The dialogue aspect meant that, as well as explicit language learning gains, the relationship between teacher and students improved significantly. As one questionnaire respondent commented, "I feel closer to you with the diary."

It should be noted that this case study was conducted by one teacher-researcher in a single university department. The process outlined in this paper has led to stronger interpersonal relationships between the researcher and participants, so the study could be open to accusations of researcher bias. Therefore, it would be interesting to observe a similar study in a different setting and with different participants and teachers.

The student requests for more correction of grammar and spelling show that there may have been some disconnect between the intention of the teacher (to improve writing through free practice), and the wants or needs of some of the students. Further study might compare the students' academic writing performance after content-focused feedback on their diaries (as in this study) with more traditional, language-focused feedback on their diaries.

While more extensive research will be beneficial, the data provided by this case study strongly suggest that personal diary writing can have positive effects on the volume, grammar complexity, vocabulary and cohesion of students' academic essay writing.

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