

Measuring progress in journal writing

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Language teachers assign interactive writing journals believing in their effectiveness with developing language skills. However, little quantitative research has investigated the benefits of journal writing. This paper first describes common beliefs about journal writing and some past quantitative studies of student journals. Following this is the explanation of the method and results of the present study. The author assigned interactive journals to Japanese university students over a semester. Journal entries were then analyzed for fluency improvement and increased sentence complexity. The data shows progress in both areas for some students but not all. In fact, other students show a decrease in fluency and sentence complexity over time. Writing progress measured through journals seems to be highly individual. Journal writing may benefit the writing fluency and grammatical complexity of only certain types of learners. There may be other benefits to journal writing that cannot be easily measured quantitatively.

インタラクティブなジャーナル・ライティングは、効果的な方法として語学学習に取り入れられることがある。しかし、ジャーナルの効果については、十分な量的な研究が行われているとはいえない。本研究は、まずジャーナル・ライティングをめぐる一般的な考察と先行研究について述べた後、本研究の方法と結果について説明する。筆者は、日本の大学生に一学期間インタラクティブ・ジャーナルを課し、彼らのジャーナルを分析した。その結果、文章の量と質の両方の面において進歩を見せた学生と、そうではない学生がいることがわかった。また、一学期の間に文章の量と質が後退した学生もいた。ジャーナルを使用したライティング指導の効果には個人差があり、この指導法はある特定のタイプの学習者には適しているようである。また、量的には容易に図れないジャーナル・ライティングの効果もあるのかもしれない。

Forms of journal writing

Teachers assign interactive journals to their students in various forms. Most teachers assign teacher-student exchanges in which they respond to student entries with their own reflections and pose additional questions for the student to respond to. Teachers may assign a topic or give students freedom to choose their own. Some teachers make corrections with grammar and spelling, while others only respond to the content. In other cases, students interchange their journals with other language students. Students may be given a secret partner in a class who they must regularly write and respond to.

Benefits of journal writing

Teachers who advocate using journals in ESL/EFL classes explain several benefits. Journals have great therapeutic value, allowing timid students a vehicle for expressing themselves. They provide opportunities for real communication with purpose, audience and message (Peyton & Reed, 1990). Journals can encourage students to write freely about ideas without obsessing with form and perhaps foster a love of writing. Further, they can be vehicles for generating ideas to be used later in more formal writing (Vanett & Jurich, 1990). An additional benefit expressed by teachers is that they become more informed of student strengths and shortcomings by seeing greater amounts of student writing and can therefore provide more individualized instruction (Reed, 1993). Teachers also can get to know the students better as individuals that can further assist in developing rapport and trust (Peyton, 1988). Journals may also serve as an acculturation tool for students adjusting to a new culture and language (Holmes, 1994).

Many teachers believe that because journals provide extensive writing practice, they directly lead to improved writing. Reports of positive outcomes of journal writing generally take the form of informal classroom observations and anecdotes. While such accounts are extremely useful in the teaching profession, little quantitative research has been done to investigate the claim that journal writing improves writing skills.

Past quantitative studies

Despite numerous publications advocating the benefits of journals, few studies attempt to measure the benefits in quantitative ways. The few existing studies offer inconclusive evidence of journal benefits to measurable features such as grammar, fluency and sentence structure. When analyzing the student- teacher dialog journals of sixth grader second language learners, Peyton (1990) discovered that, over time, acquisition of grammatical morphologies was different from student to student. Casanave (1994) analyzed the journals of university students for changes over time of the length of sentences (words per T-unit), complexity of sentences (T- units and percentage of complex T-units), and accuracy (percent of error-free T-units and their lengths). The Casanave study found sentence length and accuracy progress with some students but not all. Some students actually wrote shorter sentences over time. Some students' journals also showed a decline in accuracy. The study also calculated the percent of different content words used in the journals over time. There was little observable change; however, some of the students were using the same words in more sophisticated and focused topics. According to the Casanave results, measurable progress in these aspects of journal writing seems to differ from student to student.

More recently, Dupenthaler (2004) investigated whether journal writing could assist in improving more formal writing. This study concludes that no significant transfer of skills occurred. The study also compared the effects of the presence or absence of meaningful content feedback from a teacher on informal journal and formal writing. Only those students who received such feedback showed improvement

in error free clauses in both their informal journals and formal writing. This suggests possible benefits of meaningful written feedback from teachers.

This study

Having used journals extensively with students, I have shared the popular assumption that informal meaningful writing fosters better writing. However, this assumption has not been extensively tested. Further, those cases that report the most positive results involve extensive teacher feedback. In such cases, resembling intensive tutoring activities, the teachers probably look for and point out errors in grammar, vocabulary usage and clarity of message. Teachers who respond positively to ideas direct students to produce a writing style that the teacher believes is good writing. Students will likely respond to those things the teacher praises, and will want to emphasize those skills and styles which their teacher notices. However, there is a common belief that interactive writing between students is also beneficial.

In the past, I have often assigned student-student interactive journals, with little or no interference from me. In some cases, because of enormous class sizes, I have even assigned simple “letters to the teacher” with little or no feedback. I wonder now how much or little these journals have helped my students. Two of the more common (and more easily measured) assumptions I have heard are that journal writing improves fluency and sentence sophistication. Therefore, I proceeded with the following research question. Do interactive student-student journals improve writing fluency and sentence complexity?

Method

I took journal entries from students in a course I had taught and used methods recommended in a published study about measures of fluency and complexity in writing. In this extensive work, the authors investigated the accuracy of numerous methods of measuring writing progress by various researchers and made recommendations for future researchers (Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki, & Kim, 1998). As per the recommendations, I measured writing fluency by calculating the average words per sentence and the sentence complexity by calculating the average number of clauses per sentence.

The students in this study were second year university English majors. If compared with native speakers, they had on average a middle school reading and writing ability. They had had two semesters of basic essay writing instruction but little or no formalized grammar instruction since starting the university program. They also met with me in an integrated skills course for three hours a week and spent a great deal of that time in informal discussion activities and reaction discussions of readings. Further, students were required to read two graded novels of their choice during the term, and write a report about them. Finally, teachers in the program were required to assign student-student journals as an outside, informal writing task. Students were assigned partners to exchange with.

For this study, I asked my students to write an open letter using a secret nickname at an online website to the members of the website (mostly students from the same university program). After that, they had to read other student letters and write a response to one that most interested them. If they wished, they could respond to more than one letter. After that, open letters and responses of a total minimum of 400 words were a weekly assignment over the 14 weeks long semester. Students could change their response partners anytime. This flexible interactive component was intended to encourage interesting, well-written letters to attract responders. I did not provide any feedback and did not interfere in the interactions. I wanted them to focus completely on content and communication with their peers. Students were not assessed on content or grammatical accuracy. They simply received full credit if they fulfilled the minimum assignment and extra credit if they wrote more.

Student first week, mid term, and final week entries were chosen for study. In some cases, student first or final week passages were very short compared to their other entries. A very short first entry may have been the result of difficulties in learning how to use the online website. In such cases, the second one was taken for analysis. Also, a very short last entry may have been the result of hurry and stress from finals week, therefore, I chose the second last entry for analysis. Very few students in the course actually wrote the expected amount. Of the six students in this study, three wrote near the expected amount (approximately 5000 words) and the other three wrote significantly less. I received the permission of six writers to use their entries in this study.

Results

Table 1. Student 1 wrote 5631 words in 528 sentences.

Journal entries	First	Mid	Final
Fluency (average words /sentence)	16	9	11
Sentence Complexity (average clauses/sentence)	2.2	1.2	1.8

Table 2. Student 2 wrote 1712 words in 234 sentences

Journal entries	First	Mid	Final
Fluency	9	8	7
Sentence Complexity	1.6	1.6	.64

Table 3. Student 3 wrote 1652 words in 154 sentences

Journal entries	First	Mid	Final
Fluency	13	10	9
Sentence Complexity	1.9	1.7	2

Table 4. Student 4 wrote 1733 words in 174 sentences.

Journal entries	First	Mid	Final
Fluency	9	10	15
Sentence Complexity	2.2	1.75	2

Table 5. Student 5 wrote 5595 words in 529 sentences.

Journal entries	First	Mid	Final
Fluency	10	9	14
Sentence Complexity	3.9	1.8	2.4

Table 6. Student 6 wrote 4639 words in 490 sentences.

Journal entries	First	Mid	Final
Fluency	12	11	14
Sentence Complexity	1.9	1.7	1.8

Fluency: Average number of words per sentence

Fluency increased slightly in student six and greatly in students four and five. However, fluency decreased slightly in student two, and greatly in students one and three. The amount written by each student did not predict improvement. Student four shows the greatest improvement (40%) but also wrote much less than others. Student one, who wrote the most words, together with student three, who wrote the least words, both showed significant decline in fluency.

Sentence complexity: Average number of clauses per sentence

Sentence complexity increased slightly in student three only. There is a slight decrease in students one, four, and six. There is great decrease in students two and five. As in the fluency results, there is no noticeable relationship between the number of words written and the progress in grammar complexity. The only student to show slight improvement, student three, also wrote the least.

Conclusions

In this study, the interaction with other non-native writers did not seem to significantly benefit fluency and sentence complexity. Further, any improvement was highly individualized, as in previous studies. If the various measures of writing progress tend to show individualized results, perhaps journal writing only benefits the writing of some students. Individualized results may also be related to other factors. The decline in sentence complexity of some students could have resulted from the focus on communication and the stream of thought nature of the journals. These could perhaps lead some students to shorten and simplify their sentences as a way of gaining tighter control of their content. The presence or absence of teacher or native writer feedback may also affect the results. There may be more that can be found in a future study comparing student to student journals with the teacher- student journals.

It is not clear how much the nature of online computer journals affects the student writing. Some writers might be more comfortable in one medium than another. Keyboard writing allows for more flexibility with editing and could affect the way we process language. Did some students improve in fluency because they became better typists while others became increasing frustrated?

This lack of quantitative evidence of improvement in writing fluency and sentence complexity does not imply that journal writing is a harmful or useless activity. Indeed, many of the benefits of journal writing involve informing us as teachers of student abilities and individual needs and are essential for good teaching. Besides the obvious benefits of better- informed teachers, perhaps, as Casanave (1994) and

Peyton (1990) suggest, the benefits to student writing cannot be measured quantitatively.

Writing is both an art and a craft involving many skills. The skills are far easier to measure than the art. The benefits of journal writing may lie outside of the traditional quantitative components of ESL grammar, fluency, and accuracy. Besides being highly personal to each student, the benefits may indeed be more psychological involving affective factors and critical thinking skills so crucial to good writing. Further, they may not benefit all students in the same ways or to the same extent. Studies on such subjects would be most beneficial.

Final anecdote

Despite my comments on the overabundance of anecdotal evidence of journal writing successes compared with the rarity of quantitative research, I will end with one of my own success stories. Student five in this study was a below average achiever in previous English classes, and not particularly interested in my class in the first weeks of the semester. However, over the semester, student five wrote more than most students, interacted with several journal partners and improved significantly in writing fluency. As can be seen in the journal entries, Student five's enthusiasm for writing journals increased. E often made very long entries and answered several different student letters in the same sitting. (Only one was required per week.) I noticed the student's dramatically increased confidence and interest in the class in general. The quality of student five's work matured and the student was one of the top students by the end of the course. It was only until after the term ended

did I read the following mid term entry. Student five wrote to a classmate, "o, let's write more! You will find it very fun against all, once you start to write. I myself am today addicted to writing journals! I can't stop it!" This student's success was one extremely positive example from a group of 20 students whose stories of any improvement were far less dramatic. However, In the case of student five, journals may have played a significant role in improving affective factors and confidence.

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