

Language development in student journals

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Recent studies reiterate that Japanese students lack cohesive and coherent English writing skills, as well as syntactic maturity at the sentence level. To address these issues in my teaching context, 12th graders were assigned to hand in journals approximately every three weeks. In this project, I attempted a systematic analysis of student journals by utilizing the T-unit, a main clause plus any type of subordinate sentence, to measure the overall complexity of student writing. Although the shift from simple sentences to compound or complex sentences was not major, I received positive feedback on journal writing from students indicating their desire to continue improving their English through writing. This paper illustrates the benefits of high school English journal writing, including its potential effects on students' long-term and autonomous learning.

近年多くのリサーチにおいて、日本の高校生、大学生の書く英文のおいての統語的未熟さが指摘されている。本研究において、私は高校3年生に約3週間毎にジャーナルを書かせ、学習者の書く英文の変化をTユニットを使い検証してみた。文題面では、著しい変化は見られなかったが、学習者が各々工夫しながらジャーナルを書くことが認められ、彼らからこの課題に対して積極的な評価を得ることができように推察できる。

Recent studies (Casanave, 1991; Gallagher & McCabe, 2000) on Japanese student writing, in particular high school and freshman college classes, reiterate that students lack cohesive and coherent writing skills. Various reasons for this phenomenon have been suggested, but the biggest reason seems to be the tasks assigned to the students at the high school level. Since students have only been assigned sentence level writing, they cannot manage to organize a meaningful paragraph (Gallagher & McCabe, 2000). Furthermore, in terms of sentences, student writing is often found to lack syntactic maturity (Gaies, 1980).

In my teaching context, I conducted a survey in April, 2005, asking students about their experiences with and attitudes toward English writing. It revealed that the majority of students had never experienced

paragraph or journal writing. Even when they are assigned journal writing, traditionally the most common teacher feedback they receive involves comments on the content or correction of grammatical mistakes. Therefore, that type of feedback has not been clearly measurable to show how far student writing has improved qualitatively and quantitatively, in particular in terms of cohesion and coherence. However, my survey also disclosed that students wish to be informed of the progress of their writing skills. If student writing was evaluated in a tangible way, instructors would be able to go much further than subjective comment or entries such as “good job” or “write more” in student journal notebooks. Then, both instructors and learners could be aware of the progress of student writing skills.

As quite a high percentage of my students’ sentences are written in simple form, the shift from simple to complex or compound sentences would seem to be regarded as development. Since a number of researchers (Casanave, 1994; Crow & Ward-Lonergan, 2002; Gaies, 1980; Hunt, 1965, 1970) have utilized the T-unit, “a main clause plus all subordinate clauses and non-clausal structures attached to or embedded to it” (Hunt, 1970, p. 4) to measure the overall complexity of student writing tasks, this project was designed to attempt a systematic analysis of student journals. Although the validity of the unit as a means to measure the linguistic complexity of sentences may sound arguable (Bardovi-Harlic, 1992), to date in my teaching context there has not been any other clear index of development in student writing skills. Therefore, T-unit analysis was adopted as a measurement tool.

If the shift in student work from “simple sentences to sentences with . . . dependent clauses” (Richards et al., 2002, p. 566) is found, it could be a noticeable change. Also, if such a change can be found, it is worth examining what has caused the development. Together with the analysis of student work based on the T-unit, the survey and interviews were conducted to search for clues for the possible change. In addition, clues of newly-adopted strategies and autonomous aspects in learners were worth investigating.

How T-unit analysis has been used will therefore be considered to some extent. Perkins (1983) asserts that many researchers have been struggling to find composition scoring techniques, objective measures, and objective tests to evaluate ESL writing ability and the T-unit was one of the first objective measures to be employed as an instrument for assessing writing. The T-unit is an index of syntactic complexity that was developed by Hunt (1965), who has defined it as a “single main clause or (independent clause) plus whatever other subordinate clauses or nonclauses are attached to, or embedded within, that one main clause” (p. 661).

Researchers such as Casanave (1994) utilize the T-unit together with qualitative aspects. Analysis of student sentences is accompanied by qualitative factors such as the character and motivation of each student. Although there are some researchers who are aware of the shortcomings of the T-unit (Bardovi-Harlic, 1992), a number of researchers still resort to the unit, although holistic scoring might have the highest construct validity when overall attained writing proficiency is to be assessed. Holistic scoring involves one or more readers awarding a single grade based on the total

impression of a composition as a whole text or discourse. As my teaching context did not allow me to engage in holistic scoring, I adopted T-unit analysis for this study.

Since journal writing was to be conducted without any specific teacher instruction, I considered how this research should incorporate the significance of the development of learning and writing strategies into the methods to measure student language maturity as well as any autonomous language learning aspects that could be detected. In the next section the method for this action research will be described.

I conducted the research in a public co-educational high school near Tokyo from April 2005 to February 2006. Participants were in an elective English class which consisted of eleven 12th graders.

They were assigned to write a journal approximately every three weeks and so wrote journals 10 times throughout the course. The given topics were ones such as their future, favorite movies, and last summer holidays. The journals of three students who successfully submitted all assignments are the main focus of this examination.

Means of research

The means used was triangulation, which comprised analysis of student journals by means of the T-unit in terms of sentence maturity: the ratio between simple sentences and the T-unit, the shift from simple sentences to either complex sentences or compound sentences, and the length of journals. In addition, two surveys written in English were conducted in April 2005 (see Appendix 1), posing questions such as “Do you want to write a journal?”; “Have you ever

written a journal in English?”; “What is your longest English writing?”; and “What would you like the instructor to do as feedback?” In January 2006, more questions were added. Finally, interviews on journal writing and other writing activities were conducted in Japanese and recorded in February 2006.

To reduce confusion throughout this study, a T-unit was counted as a main sentence together with any type of subordinate sentence. Therefore, compound sentences and complex sentences were counted as one T-unit sentence. Also, a simple sentence with a subordinate phrase was regarded as a simple sentence because of countless ambiguous cases in discerning if it was a T-unit sentence or not. In addition, as the situation for journal writing is one where learners write on their own and can apply skills in the process of self-directed learning, autonomous learning aspects and newly adopted strategies were to be detected.

In the next section I will analyze three student journals together with questionnaire and interview results. The students' consent was given and their names were changed in this analysis.

Examples and results of student journals, questionnaires and interviews

Journals

It cannot be claimed conclusively that student sentence maturity in terms of T-unit analysis developed as time went by. However, journal writing seemed to be accepted favorably by the three students and all three seemed to have developed their learning skills and strategies to become more

advanced autonomous learners. The details will be described below from the aspect of an in-depth T-unit analysis of their journals.

Sachiko

The reason for Sachiko's choice of this class was for improvement of her English skills and preparation for the entrance examination for the medical nursing faculty. Her grades in English classes were excellent.

Sachiko's first journal was written in April 2005. The underlined sentences are the T-units. (Journal entries are transcribed here without corrections.)

The picture I like most is "Ima Ainiyukimasu." I am impressed with this picture. It's a very very good story, so I want to watch it many times. I wept when I watched it. Most people will weep because the story is sad. The heroine has already died but she comes back to life a few days later. And they spend a good time day after day.... In the end she was to go out...very, very sad. Nothing is so impressive as this picture. Mr. Endo have you watched the movie? By all means you should watch it, please, if you have not watched it, yet. You will be very impressed, too.

Sachiko's first journal included six T-unit sentences. The following is her journal on segregation written in November:

Is it necessary for us to discriminate against other people? I think I cannot find any necessity. All of us have the same value and it is so good. If there is

no discrimination in the word, we are sure to come to be happy and live in peace. I think we are not prejudiced against other people based on the color of eyes, of hair, of skin.

This journal was almost completely composed of T-unit sentences.

However, the majority of sentences in her last journal below ended up in simple sentences though it was the longest. Therefore, although her first journal included a fairly large number of T-unit sentences, Sachiko did not increase her use of complex sentences as the months went by.

The country I want to visit most

I want to go to Hokkaido most. Firstly there are many famous places. For example, the clock tower in Sapporo, the lavender field in Biei, and many other places. Secondary Hokkaido is a region with heavy snowfalls. I like snow very much. I want to play in the snow. I want to clear the snow from the roof and play a snowball fight. The snow festival is carried out in Hokkaido. I visited twice when I was a child. It was very very fun. Thirdly Hokkaido has many kinds of foods. They are so good!! Crab, salmon and noodles. I wish to visit Hokkaido again. Mr. Endo which place is the most impressive to you? Have you been to Hokkaido? If so, shall we talk about the place?

Emiko

Emiko was well-balanced in English class, where she got excellent grades. She wished to major in medical nursing in the future. Her first journal completely consisted of simple sentences and no T-units at all:

I like *Tonari no Totoro* best of all movies. Because Totoro is very cute. He is a ghost. And he lives in the forest. His friend is Neko bus. What is Neko bus? This bus looks like a cat. I want to ride on it. Only children are to see Totoro. So adults can't see him. Satsuki and Mei are sisters. They saw Totoro and Nekobus. Because they are children. Totoro and Nekobus helped them. Totoro and Nekobus are very kind. So I like them. This movie makes me happy. So I love *Tonari no Totoro*!!

Her first journal had 92 words and was comprised of 18 simple sentences. However, she started to use T-unit sentences when she wrote about her summer holiday in September 2005.

I was looking forward to coming of the summer vacation. Because I wanted to go to my grandparents' home. On August 13 I went there. I was so glad that I saw them. My mother and I talked so much with them. And I helped their housework. For example I washed dishes and their clothes. I gave massage to my grandfather. He was very glad, so I was very happy, too. I thought that I wanted to come to my grandparents' home next year and that I would like to make my grandparents glad.

Emiko's longest journal in terms of words was written in June 2005 on the coming school festival in June. It was found to have included three T-unit sentences:

I think that the school festival in my school will make me happy. Because it has very nice stage performances and many kinds of food shop by each class. My class will become a food shop. What kind of shop will it become? It will become a *okononiyaki* shop. That is called Takahashiya. Takahashiya's *okononiyaki* is sure to be very delicious. I hope that it will sell out all of it. So you should come here early with someone. I am looking forward to all stages by every class. I am sorry that my class is only class that does not play on stage. But our class' Takahashiya will be very great!!! So you should come to Takahashiya and buy *okononiyaki*.

Michiko

Michiko was a serious student and seemed to be conscious of the coming entrance examinations to become a medical school student, too. Her grades in English classes were fairly high. The following is her first journal:

My favorite move is *Swing Girl*. The story is on the brass band club of a high school. The girls are novice at playing the instruments. But they practice hard on the instrument, then they are good at it. And at last, they succeed in their jazz stage.

I belong to the brass band club. I sympathize with them somehow. And when I watched this movie,

I respected them. I want to play the instrument very well. So I practice hard. This movie is very interesting. I would like many people to watch this move.

The following is her journal written in May 2005 on what she will be doing one year later:

What I will be doing this time next year

I will be studying in technical college. If I have nothing to do, I will have a lot of trouble. But I'm not excellent. So I must study hard. If I enter technical college, I want to study to realize my dream. My dream is to become a physiotherapist now. Someday I want to help the injured. So I will be studying at this time next year. I want to do my best.

Although Michiko steadily used T-units, her longest journal on her last summer vacation did not include any T-unit sentences. Therefore, it cannot be argued that she increased T-unit sentences as journal writing went on. Appendix 2 shows the number of sentences, that of T-unit sentences and the ratio between simple sentences and T-unit sentences of the three students' journals.

Questionnaires and interviews

The responses of these three students to the questionnaires seemed to reveal that they accepted journal writing, although they had never experienced this type of writing activity before. The contents of the questionnaires and interviews were almost the same. Since interviews were conducted

only once in February, I focused on their impression of journal writing reflected in questions 15-17. Although some topics seemed to be rather demanding, all three students generally responded to the given topics with sincerity. Their overall comments showed that they were satisfied with my responses and feedback on journals and the students were found to welcome my responses and read them carefully. In addition, the three revealed that they had gained confidence in their English, and the word "fun" was often heard in the interviews.

The interviews and questionnaires revealed that Sachiko was happy with the volume of journal assignments (ten times throughout the year). She sounded satisfied to have expressed her thoughts about her music or brass band activities, her friends, and her summer holidays. She responded in her interview that "It is fun writing my own opinion, idea as I like." However, Sachiko did not seem to be overly conscious of syntactic complexity.

Emiko said that "when I have knowledge on the topics, it seems fun to write journal," and she seemed to have realized the significance of content schemata. At the same time she seemed to care less about her English sentences than Sachiko and Michiko because she stated that some topics made her write whatever came into her mind, in particular such topics as her last summer vacation or the coming school festival.

Michiko revealed that she felt like writing journals when she had a happy event and she liked to share the happy news with others. Her favorite topic was herself. A typical case is her journal on her previous summer holiday. On the other hand, she had difficulty in expressing her opinion on such issues as segregation and Gandhi. Initially, she could not

do her assignments in my reading classes or this elective class without writing verbatim translations of everything she wrote, but she gradually stopped doing so. When she was asked the reason for her change, she stated that she could manage to get her meaning across in English because my feedback made her feel secure. On the other hand when I slightly insinuated that she should use conjunctions or discourse markers such as *and*, *since*, and *firstly*, she seemed not to have been aware of what this meant. Examples of my feedback are as follows: “So good. Your idea is clear. As you are strongly motivated to become a physiotherapist, I am sure you will succeed. Go for it.”

The interviews showed some new aspects perceived by the students and were similar to the findings from the questionnaires. However, the interviews were also able to extend the issues to student strategies. The three students’ reading strategies are chiefly bottom-up and this was reflected in the way they wrote their journals. In particular, as stated above, Michiko wrote her English sentences meticulously with Japanese sentences below them. However, the Japanese counterparts to her English sentences were not found after three months. She disclosed that her fear of being misunderstood ceased to exist because clear communication had been established between us.

It was the same with Sachiko and Emiko. In particular, Sachiko stated that she continued her journal writing even though she knew her sentences had some grammatical mistakes. Here again my feedback seemed to have contributed to her increasing confidence. She ended her journals with questions for me, and my responses and feedback made her feel more secure in writing her journal,

although indeed her sentences often included syntactical and morphological errors. As for Michiko, while she did not change drastically, aspects of risk taking and newly adopted autonomous learning strategies were being developed. Larger words were starting to appear in her journals and she stated that she feared less in describing her opinion in English. Michiko also voluntarily wrote her journal twice on the same topic, Gandhi.

The three did not necessarily put priority on grammar correction but rather on interchange and communication with me. In their interviews they disclosed an increased confidence in their English and said they began to find joy in expressing themselves as synergy was being created. The three also revealed that as the others were making efforts, they were stimulated by one another. In addition, they revealed that they shared information and exchanged ideas. Although they did not copy others’ journals, they brought up their ideas and strove to respond in their own writing. Thus aspects of cooperative learning, risk-taking, and change of strategies can be noted.

Discussion

From the viewpoint of the quantitative aspects of this study, no drastic changes were found in terms of the number of T-unit sentences. As far as the increase of T-unit sentences in Michiko and Sachiko’s journals is concerned, the student writing skill may not have matured. However, Emiko steadily increased her use of T-unit sentences. The biggest reason for the change in her journal is her adaptation of explanations of the use of conjunctions in the reading textbook.

On the other hand, as many positive qualitative aspects were found, journal writing could be justified from the viewpoint of promoting self-directed learning and learner responsibility for their own development. In particular, Sachiko seemed to have put more priority on communication than anything else and, as she disclosed in her interview, interaction with me was important to her.

From the viewpoint of strategy use, several new aspects were facilitated by journal writing. Although Oxford (1990) mentions that there is no complete agreement on the classification of types of strategies, use of social, affective, and metacognitive strategies can be traced in the three students. As the three stated in interviews and questionnaires, they found enjoyment in writing and this seemed to have contributed to lowering their affective filters. Although some of the students used to write Japanese translations of their English sentences for fear of being misinterpreted, the Japanese entries steadily decreased. As the students disclosed in the interviews, interaction between them and me meant that they no longer felt the necessity of translating into Japanese. This indicates that they examined their own learning styles, which could be seen as one step towards the development of metacognitive strategies.

Harbingers of autonomous learning can also be observed in the fact that, although students were not assigned to rewrite their journals, they sometimes voluntarily submitted another journal on the same topic, enriching the contents by utilizing resources they found such as watching movies and gathering information about Gandhi or Rosa Parks. For instance, although the students were not provided with the information on the assassination of Gandhi, one student added a question about why he was assassinated.

As the three students were on good terms with each other, the effect of synergy was nourished. Although they did not copy other students' journals, they disclosed that they had discussed given topics and exchanged their ideas. Their interaction can be regarded as use of "social strategies" (Oxford, 1990, p. 145). Appendix 3 shows some of the three students' feedback in the interviews.

Furthermore, it can be argued that journal writing contributes to the progress of learners' life-long study because they revealed in their interviews such effects as: "I feel tempted to keep writing journal on myself after I have graduated from high school."

As Tarone and Yule (1989) assert that self-esteem and the desire to learn is the crucial factor in the process of learning a second language, journal writing together with my feedback could be seen to contribute to raising student confidence and continuance in writing. Tarone and Yule (1989) also claim that students' desire to express themselves can overcome setbacks and mistakes. My students' wish to reveal themselves could be argued to have motivated them enough to overcome their own mistakes.

Indeed, since Holec (1981) asserts that ideally autonomy should be created through a friendly atmosphere between the teacher and the learner by lowering the sense of threat, journal writing in this class could be highly beneficial for nourishing autonomous learning.

Implications

As Casanave (1991) states, the significance of qualitative aspects need to be taken into account. Other than a slightly

observable progress of syntactic maturity, feedback from students was what really enabled me to be aware of the meaning of journal writing. As controlled writing still dominates in writing class, in particular at the Japanese high school level, students tend to put priority on memory and to be assigned to translate from Japanese sentences into English. As a result, quite a few students have not experienced even paragraph writing.

Although there could be pros and cons to valuing the comprehensibility of journals rather than correction of syntactic and morphological errors, a writing activity not accompanied by specific restrictions or instructions could provide learners with an enjoyment they have rarely experienced in writing and can develop learners' own learning methods. I felt very rewarded to observe students' development as learners and their adoption of new learning strategies.

Conclusion

The degree of contribution of journal writing to students' linguistic development in terms of syntactic maturity could not be established with certainty from this study. However, various types of unexpected findings were observed. Above all, the most rewarding aspect to me was the birth of enjoyment that students experienced in writing. At the same time, journal writing could help students be aware of the role of the English language as a means of communication (Pickett, 1991). In this project T-unit analysis was a new field to me and it seems to have provided me with a new insight to analyze student writing tasks. Furthermore since the three students express their wish to continue journal writing, this

project could be developed into a longitudinal case study to monitor their progress over time.

Endo Kazufumi is a student of Teachers College of Columbia University in Tokyo campus. He is currently interested in the study of the effects of journal writing on development of student writing skill.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire

- 1) What essay had been the longest you had ever written till the end of the 11th grade?
- 2) What feedback did you get?
- 3) Do you think it is fun to write your ideas in English?
- 4) Had you done any type of journal writing before our class?
- 5) Do you think it is fun to express yourself in English?
- 6) What type of English composition have you engaged in?
- 7) Do you feel like expressing yourself in English from now on?
- 8) If you think so, in what case do you want to write in English?
- 9) What type of topics do you like best?
- 10) Do you feel excited in describing and expressing yourself in English in class?
- 11) Do you worry a lot about grammar or are you concerned that your sentences have grammatical mistakes?
- 12) Are you a risk taker? Do you like to use a new expression and new vocabulary instead of using the same expression again and again?
- 13) What type of feedback do you wish to get?

- 14) Do you want to know how much your English writing skills have improved mathematically?
- Questions asked in only January
- 15) Look back on your journal writing and tell me how you feel about it.
- 16) Do you want to continue journal writing?
- 17) Do you mind sending me your journal even after you graduate from high school?

“Although I had not been certain about my English, communication with the teacher in English by means of journal is rewarding.” (Emiko)

“I have started to get the feeling that English can work as a means of communication.” (Sachiko)

“I felt rewarded to read my journal in front of visitors in particular Dr. Terry Royce, Mr. Endo’s instructor.” (Michiko)

“As I had felt unsafe about using new vocabulary, I dared to use new vocabulary or some words I had known in reading textbooks.” (Michiko)

Appendix 2

Ratio between T-unit Sentences and Total Sentences in Each Journal

	Apr.	May	June	July	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.
Sachiko	5/13 38%	5/10 50%	1/7 14%	2/12 17%	2/8 25%	3/6 50%	2/4 50%	2/6 33%	1/6 17%	1/9 11%
Emiko	0/16 0%	3/12 25%	2/5 40%	2/4 50%	4/11 36%	1/6 17%	3/6 50%	2/9 22%	2/9 22%	1/9 11%
Michiko	3/14 21%	2/8 25%	1/9 11%	1/14 7%	0/14 0%	1/8 13%	3/7 43%	4/10 40%	4/8 50%	2/8 25%

Appendix 3

Examples of Student Feedback in Interviews

The feedback below came from interviews with the three students on journal writing. .

“This is actually my first time to express my own opinion in English.” (Emiko)