A Journal on Student, Teacher, and Researcher Journal Writing

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Journal writing is an open, unevaluated form of free writing that can be used by L1 and L2 students, teachers, and researchers to help them develop language fluency and proficiency, to promote reflective and critical thinking, to contribute to research activities, and to communicate with self, peers, and teachers. The main point of journal writing is to promote evaluation-free reflection and communication, and when written in the L2, to encourage fluency rather than be used as a graded and corrected assignment. This article consists of a series of journal entries about my experiences with different kinds of journal writing over many years. The entries describe "dissertation journals," language learning journals, private and shared journals, journals for promoting critical and analytical reflection, and journals written for research purposes.

Keywords: evaluation-free writing, fluency, language development, reflection, response to reading, research tool

A Short History of My Journal Writing Experience

Journal Entry 1

Today I got an interesting email from Dennis Koyama and his associates at the *JALT Journal*, inviting me to contribute a short piece to a new section

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of *JJ* (Expositions) that will appear in an issue in May 2023. He was familiar with my work on journal writing (much of it done while I was in Japan). As I thought about Dennis's invitation, I wondered first if I should accept, and then when I did, how to organize an article for *JJ* and how to write in a style compatible with my messages. It occurred to me the other day that I could write it as a number of journal entries on various aspects of journal writing that have struck me as important over the years. So that is what I decided to do. Following a journal writing style that I am comfortable with, I am trying not to be bound by rigid academic conventions, and instead composing this article as a series of journal entries.

This project for the *JALT Journal* takes me back over much of my academic career and up to the present moment, and pushes me to reflect on the place of various kinds of journal writing in my personal and professional life and in the lives of past and present students. This first entry is too long to be considered a "short" history, but it covers the background that I wanted to include about how my interest in and experiences with journal writing developed over time.

I began decades ago, before I went to Japan, writing what I called "dissertation journals" while I was in my PhD program. My dissertation project concerned how writing helped socialize graduate students into their disciplines, and as I wrote in my journals about my developing ideas and my responses to readings, I was doing for myself what I would write about in my dissertation—getting socialized into a discipline. I filled three hardbound casebooks with handwritten entries over several years. These journal entries included lots of reflections on and stories of my case study participants and their professors whom I was interviewing and observing. I wrote about more participants than I needed too, but I think that in this kind of journal writing for case study research purposes, there is no way to know ahead of time which participants will become central cases and which will drop out, so good to write about all of them. The best thing about using my journals to write about individual participants was that I came to know and respect them deeply and to care about progress they were making in their own doctoral studies. As case study participants in my own project, they came alive, and I could write about them with compassion and understanding. It was during this time that I began to realize the value for researchers of keeping journals, a realization that has influenced my later work as a dissertation advisor with students in Japan.

In my dissertation journals, I included not just reflections on my participants, but also some responses to readings and reflections on my own dis-

sertation progress and interactions with two advisors. Some of the responses to readings, in revised and synthesized form, would find their way into the dissertation literature review chapter. The reflections on my progress and on my interactions with advisors helped me monitor and adjust my moods and attitudes, allowing me to express privately what I might not have been able to share with them or with classmates (no matter how much we liked to gossip about our professors). These lessons I learned about the personal value of writing private journals during difficult academic work stayed with me and I hope have been passed on to my own graduate students in Japan.

But not all journal writing needs to be private. Whether writing in their L1 or their L2, students who write journals to their teachers and professors are helping themselves move their work and their academic language forward. (Vanett & Jurich, 1990, wrote about this a long time ago.) The journal writing helps students turn ideas into language, and helps teachers understand what their students are doing and thinking. During my doctoral program and dissertation preparation, I wrote what I called "academic letters" to one of my advisors. I didn't call these journals at the time, but they served the same purpose, including serving as a forum for my main advisor and me to communicate. I wrote about questions I had, ideas I was developing for the dissertation project, and comments on some of the readings I was doing. I somehow wrote more freely when I was not being evaluated by her for a grade or writing required academic papers for a class or independent study. I am not sure how many dissertation advisors have time to read and respond to journal-like "academic letters," but in my own current work with doctoral students in Japan, I find that dissertation students who write me long journal-like emails or send Word files of reflections on readings and progress get pretty prompt attention from me, including encouragement to keep working. The most important part of this kind of journal writing for students of any kind is that it is evaluation-free. How liberating!

My early experiences with journal writing continued after I completed my PhD, but switched to journal writing for language development (see the next section). I began reading about the benefits of journal writing and got very interested in journal writing as a way help to my students in Japan develop fluency in English and to lose their fear of making mistakes. Drawing on my classroom practices and on my readings, I published a few articles (Casanave, 1992, 1994, 1995), a small edited collection with Keio SFC teachers, (Casanave, 1993a), and a book on journal writing (Casanave, 2011), and made a few conference presentations. I was inspired early on by Joy Kreeft Peyton's work on dialogue journals (Peyton, 1990; Peyton & Reed, 1990;

Peyton & Staton, 1991, 1993), Rebecca Mlynarczyk's (1998) book on journal writing with second language learners, and others who devoted their teaching, research, and writing to issues in journal writing.

During my years in Japan, I asked my undergraduate EFL students to write journals regularly in English, hoping they would develop fluency and lose their fears of making mistakes. Some students, predictably, hated this journal writing experience and others blossomed. But all of them developed fluency and speed and expressivity, much to their surprise by the end of a term. I also, for a time, kept a handwritten journal in my baby Japanese (which I had never studied previously) that documented my efforts at learning Japanese kanji, kana, and syntax by writing about my daily life. I let my EFL students know about this effort, and shared some of my awkward Japanese journal entries with them. I was hoping to write these entries in the style of a dialogue journal with a Japanese friend outside the university context, but when he read these journals, he mainly made some language corrections, even though I had asked him to write back in the style of a conversation. (See my 2012 "Diary of a Dabbler" article.) The eye-opener of this experience was that I was trying to do what I had been requiring my own EFL students to do, and came to appreciate the burdensome but ultimately gratifying task, as well as the importance of a teacher's substantive responses, not meticulous language corrections, to students' journals.

During my early years in Japan, I also began teaching master's and doctoral students at an American university campus there, and periodically asked the graduate students (all very advanced L2 English or native English speakers) to write a research journal or a dissertation journal, to which I would respond. This early experience with graduate students convinced me of the value of journal writing or its equivalent in helping students formulate and refine ideas, grapple with problems with methods or participants, and interpret findings (see more below, in the section Journal Writing for Research).

Fast forward to the present day: I continue to write a perfunctory handwritten personal journal in English, but with little of the beneficial reflection I have long touted and almost none of the L2 language practice, but for the recent emails with a friend in Spanish that I mention below. My current handwritten journal is mainly a record of things happening around me or in the world, including connections I have with a few friends around the world or occasional health matters, details that I record so as to consult and remember them if needed. My email correspondence with a few friends, some of which is journal-like, continues to serve purposes that have been

touted in the journal writing literature as beneficial for promoting reflection and developing ideas. As of this writing, one of these correspondents writes me in Spanish, which as an L1 English speaker he is trying to improve, and I respond in Spanish (my strong L2). In general, these email "journals," both those in English and Spanish, provide an ongoing record of the lives and thoughts of my correspondents and me—a lot of narratives, a few rants, and some good language practice. Such practices benefit students, teachers, and researchers alike. My remaining entries are organized by theme, not by chronology.

Journal Writing for Language Development

Journal Entry 2

A basic question about journal writing for language development concerns whether the mere act of writing in an L2 extensively and over time (as I tried to do with my Japanese journal, as I asked my EFL students in Japan to do in English, and as I am trying to do now in Spanish) will contribute to that development, or whether teacher or peer feedback (comments or corrections) is necessary for this development. In my undergraduate EFL classes in Japan, students started out writing journals weekly. I felt strongly that my feedback comments (not corrections) would help students develop their thinking and conceptualizing and would provide models for vocabulary and grammar that fit what they were trying to say. The commentary from me demonstrated to the students that they had a real reader who was paying attention to what they were saying, not just how they were saying it. Fluency soared, and students often commented that they were able to complete a journal in less time than when they started. But after a few semesters of trying to read and comment on 90 journals a week, I switched to bi-weekly submissions, and still barely managed to keep up. But it was worth it.

My writing speed in my Japanese journals improved too. I was hoping to get substantive feedback on my Japanese journals, of the sort I was providing my EFL students, but my Japanese friend-tutor responded only with corrections to my grammar, kanji, and kana. I was grateful, but the tutorial experience differed from what I was hoping to experiment with on myself and from what much journal writing literature recommended (i.e., free, uncorrected writing). There really is a case to be made for free writing that teachers or friends possibly read but do not comment on, as well as free writing that is for the writer's eyes only (as Peter Elbow [1973, 1999] told us long ago about free writing in L1). In both cases, if students (and teachers along with them) are writing regularly in their L2, the mere practice suppos-

edly improves their fluency of expression, if not the grammatical accuracy of their expression. And if journal writers are writing about topics they have read about in the target language and/or topics they are interested in, so much the better. In all cases in the school context, they are using their journal writing to develop their academic literacy (Fogal & Koyama, 2022).

I always liked the idea of reading response journals to help students expand their academic literacy. Readings are a primary source of learners' vocabulary and syntax, even if items are only copied verbatim into their journals, but especially if incorporated into their own descriptions and discussions. By observing closely how the L2 works in an interesting reading (including in blogs and emails with competent L2 users) and in feedback and commentary they might receive, students shift their focus from learning rules and memorizing words to using patterns and words (even in nonstandard ways) to interact with authors and with correspondents and to make meaning. How does an author or correspondent express this or that idea? What words (nouns and verbs in particular) are used to express an idea, describe a process, or make an argument? Can students use some of those same words and parts of sentences in their own journals and other writings, without plagiarizing? Can they foster their language development by patchwriting (Pecorari, 2003)?

Journal Entry 3

Some months after completing the previous entry, I was deeply into rereading a long novel in Spanish by Carlos Ruiz Zafón, *La Sombra del Viento*. Even on the second reading, which admittedly was going faster than the first attempt, I continued to find the reading difficult, mostly due to a great deal of vocabulary that I could not even find in my tattered pocket dictionary. I occasionally wrote email in Spanish about this book to my friend who was trying to learn more Spanish. Even though I did indeed make a few notes on interesting patterns and phrases in this book, as I had hoped my EFL students in Japan would do with their reading, I neglected to write in a journal about my responses to this complex story and to the language. Thinking about my students in Japan forced to write journals in response to difficult readings, I wrote to my friend about my inability to read smoothly if I had look up every other word in my Spanish-English dictionary and about my wilting motivation to persist: "Quisiera avisarte que continuo leyendo la novela muy larga de Carlos Ruiz Zafón (*La Sombra del Viento*) con interés, pero me siento un poco desanimada a causa de todas las palabras nuevas. Es imposible leer si busco cada palabra desconocida en el diccionario" (email, October 10,

2022). I think my Spanish and my motivation would have improved had I been able to make myself write a reading response journal of some kind in Spanish, even in the form of more emails in Spanish to my friend.

Journal Entry 4

I asked my friend who is trying to improve his Spanish, now that he is retired and has more time, to explain how he was doing this, and he wrote me that he is using what he calls "diarios" (what I am calling journals) to help him with his language development. I was curious as to how his experiences compared with those of some of my EFL students in Japan. He wrote me, in English, that in the past, his Spanish language development was hindered because he hesitated to speak or write if his grammar and vocabulary were not perfect (the dilemma that many EFL students in Japan face). He has found a way more recently to use Google Translate to help him express himself in his "diarios." In explaining how he tried to overcome his fear of making mistakes, he told me this:

> "So I decided to start writing in a diary every day. I've been doing that for about 5 months now. I write just 8-10 lines of Spanish about anything that comes into my mind. And I make extensive use of Google Translate in the following way: After I've written a sentence or two in Spanish, I have GT translate it into English. If the English doesn't reflect what I was trying to say, I work with the Spanish until it does. And I'll use GT to help me say it. Then I'll switch the process and have GT translate the translated English into Spanish. In the early days of the diary, I was using GT to do a lot of the translating from English to Spanish. As I went along, however, I got better at having the Spanish->English translation say what I was trying to say – without having to use GT to do it. And my vocabulary and phrases for everyday things improved. […] What has surprised me about writing a diary in Spanish is that it has helped me get over my fear of being misunderstood when speaking Spanish by not having perfect vocabulary and grammar."

This is a lesson he has learned late in life, and one that is central to the benefits of journal writing for language learning: first, that our L2 does not have to be perfect for us to be able to communicate and to improve, and second, that writing in the L2 does indeed contribute to language develop-

ment. My hope in my own teaching career has been that if EFL students in Japan and elsewhere can use journal writing to overcome their own fears of making mistakes, their fluency and their motivation will flourish, and language development will happen even without their needing to perfect every phrase.

Journal Writing for Educational Development

Journal Entry 5

By "educational development," I refer loosely to growth in the kind of reflection and critical and analytical attention to content, ideas, and arguments that we expect from a student, teacher, or professor in an educational setting (Casanave, 1995; Lee, 2008). I'm not sure, but it is possible that this kind of development does not happen in journal writing without intervention of a more competent interlocutor, in the style of Vygotsky's (1978) scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development. Interactions with more competent others can occur in a variety of ways: oral conferences for discussing journal entries, substantive feedback from teachers with revisions and responses from students, and dialogue journals. However, as some of my students in Japan told me, even though journal writing "changed my college life" for the better because they were reflecting on things they would not have thought about without the journals (Casanave, 1993b), they needed to be writing on topics they were somewhat familiar with. None of us, writing in L1 or L2, can write fluently and meaningfully on topics we know nothing about—ones that are outside our Zones of Proximal Development.

Oral Conferences

In the context of Japan, oral conferences and consultations between English teachers and students can provide the kind of engagement and attention that young university students as well as graduate students can benefit greatly from. These conferences do not have to be one-on-one, but can be between two or three students and their teacher or even just among students. The point is to have a small gathering focused on students' journal entries, where students can read their journal entries aloud and engage the interest and commentary of one or more listeners. Of course, this activity can be done in a whole-class format as well, but some students might be fearful to display their possibly imperfect English in front of all their classmates, or would hesitate to express any private thoughts in such a setting. In pairs or small groups, if there are no serious privacy issues, the hope is that listeners-

readers would be attentive for bits they might not have understood, or that they found particularly interesting, or that they have ideas and information about that will further the journal writer's knowledge and understanding. Brave teachers who are writing journals in their L2 (their students' L1) can also share their own L2 journal entries with student listeners or readers. Students in this way become empowered as "teachers" of their teacher, a confidence booster if there ever was one.

Teacher Feedback and Student Response

Teacher or peer feedback on journals (NOT corrections) is what enables an "educational discussion" to take place, particularly if teachers or peers ask journal writers to continue the discussion with follow-up responses to the feedback. For this feedback-response discussion to succeed, both teachers and students need to set aside the conventional attitude that student written work needs to be graded and corrected. (In my undergraduate classes in Japan, I would mark the journals as done or not done, without a grade, but added numerous comments and questions on each one, time permitting.) It might be easier to shift to this interactional attitude if both students and teachers can conceptualize the journal writing activity as a dialogue, both between-among students, and between teachers and students. It can help to label the activity with the well-known moniker from many years ago, the "dialogue journal."

Dialogue Journals

As I mentioned in the introduction, dialogue journals (Peyton, 1990) consist of ongoing written communication between students and teachers or peers, whether done electronically or by hand and in oral conferences. If students are not confronted with too many rules and regulations for how to write their journal, and if they are not required to revise them unless they wish, they can greatly improve their L2 written fluency, and depending on the topics they have chosen (or been asked) to write about, can also deepen their thinking about themes in their lives or about topics they are learning about in their classes.

The main problem I faced with this interactive journal activity in Japan was the size and number of my classes. As I mentioned in Journal Entry 2, I recall one term in which I was receiving 90 journals a week to read and comment on, clearly an impossible load to keep up with, even nowadays if done all electronically. In such cases, it seems that teachers have only two

choices: Ask students to write fewer journals, or cut back on the number and depth of responses to them.

Peer reading and responding helps, but in my experience, students really appreciate the one-on-one personal responses from a teacher. This means that the responses cannot be generic and perfunctory (like the classic comment "Interesting!"). They need to be a sincere act of communication, a real dialogue. To this end, teachers who make real comments and ask real questions of students, in the hope of a response of some kind in the next journal entry, are setting themselves up as genuine communication partners in the target language. Likewise, students who ask real questions in their journals of both their teachers and their peer readers are communicating purposefully in their L2 perhaps in ways they would not be able to do as easily in their L1. (How many students have we known who ask genuine questions of their teacher!)

However, in my experience in Japan, I found it difficult to break the expected pattern of "teacher question—student response," particularly with undergraduate students. The teacher is supposed to know everything, correct everything, control everything, in the conventional view. And some students believe that if a piece of written work is not graded and corrected it does not count as an educational activity to be done as part of a language class. There is also a deep-seated belief by many that one's L2 cannot improve without errors being corrected. One of the initial challenges for teachers is thus to help students understand the purposes and procedures of communicative journals. It can help if teachers can present evidence to students of positive changes and development of the L2 over time, perhaps with data from previous classes or from the literature. And teachers who write journals in their L2 along with students are ideal models for the benefits of journal writing.

One caution—the fatigue factor. By the end of a term, both students and teachers are likely to be tired, pressed for time, and ready for the term to end. Journal entries might become shorter and be done less carefully, possibly adding to rather than reducing language errors. Adjustments can thus be made at any time during a term, to maintain the freshness and purposefulness of the (dialogue) journal activity.

Journal Writing for Research

Journal Entry 6

Journal writing is a fabulous activity for both students and teachers who are doing research projects, no matter how simple or complex the project.

Research journals can record all kinds of valuable information, in both the L1 and the L2. As I wrote in the introduction, my dissertation journals formed a central part of my PhD research activities, helping me to process readings, to pose and clarify ideas and questions that were curiosities and puzzles to me, to record what happened at various stages, and to work through occasional difficult encounters with participants or advisors. Moreover, in a private research journal, we can rant with impunity.

In a research journal that takes the form of email exchanges between students and teachers, as I have done for many years now with students in Japan who are writing doctoral dissertations, both students and their teacher-advisor have an ongoing record of how a project develops over time, how problems and confusions are confronted and overcome, and how drafts of written work with substantive feedback develop into finished products. We also have a record of contextual and environmental factors that might be influencing motivation and engagement.

Hence, from undergraduate to doctoral level, as well as part of a teacher's professional activities, journal writing can record numerous kinds of information, activities, and feelings that benefit research projects, either for actual use later in the project or its write-up, or for processing privately the confusions and complexities that go hand in hand with both short-term and longer-term research projects.

Journal Entry 7

I don't know how many teachers write journals, but teachers who do engage in journal writing do so for numerous reasons. If their journals are personal, the writing might simply be a private way to decompress after a stressful day, to plan for the next day, or to reflect on how a day, a week, or even a term has gone. What worked and what didn't work in today's class? What readings have I come across that might address some of the issues that I face in my teaching? What might work better tomorrow, or next term, or next year? What teachers do I know with whom I could share some of my journal entries and maybe get their perspectives? A teacher's journal can be used for both planning and reflection on current teaching and for developing writings, conference presentations, and research projects that might be connected with that teaching.

Researchers too benefit greatly from keeping journals, and indeed, researcher journals constitute a kind of data in some kinds of projects. Ideas and quotes can be drawn directly from them that include field observations, summaries of conversations and interviews with participants, and descrip-

tions of research sites and activities. Such journals also record responses to readings, initial ideas for projects, hypotheses and speculations, initial analyses of data, problems and successes with participants, and the development of arguments and interpretations.

Some teachers and researchers—particularly overworked ones in Japan—might protest that they have no time or energy for journal writing, on top of their normal work lives and snatches of private life if they can even manage these. It's true that journal writing requires some time (though not necessarily a lot), and a place and time to write that afford the writer chances to think, reflect, and compose, even if just for 15 minutes a day, without interruptions. Journal writers thus need to know themselves—where and when are they able to write? An office, a coffee shop, a room at home, or a noisy bumpy bus or train? With or without music? How about on a walk, without anything except a device for recording oral musings? What about a pictorial journal (a good idea for students too?) using digital images, or hand-done drawings, dated, and labeled with or without extensive commentary, and discussed or not with others? The point is that teachers can apply the same purposes to their own researcher journals as they do to their students' research journals. In all cases, questions, ideas, and experiences get transformed into language.

Concluding Comments

Journal Entry 8

As this journal on journal writing comes to its end, I wonder what Words of Wisdom, Hope, and Motivation I might convey to students and teachers in the Japan context and to myself as an L2 language user. In Japan, it continues to be challenging for EFL students to use English outside the confines of the classroom, and for me, living in California, with little regular access to the L2 (some Spanish, a little Japanese, and even less French since my ancient cousin in France died), I have to create opportunities to use my L2s. As I discovered long ago through my struggles to become a competent user of Spanish and a survival user of Japanese, languages are rarely learned deeply in a classroom context or in sporadic tutorials. It can even be challenging for English teachers in Japan who are L2 learners of Japanese to acquire Japanese in a steady and naturalistic way, unless one happens to be blessed with a patient and understanding Japanese partner. I recall that my attempts at using my survival Japanese in naturalistic contexts when I was living in Japan were often met by responses in English, or as was the case with my attempts at journal writing in Japanese, by language corrections.

So whatever these final words are, they must also apply to myself. Real communication partners help greatly in the journal writing effort, providing both an audience of interested (we hope) listeners-readers, and intentional and unintentional feedback of various kinds, not just corrections. What I have learned most recently in my efforts to improve my Spanish is that real communication in an L2 can come from unexpected places, including from communication partners who are themselves learners of the L2. As I think back on these efforts to communicate in Spanish in this past year, I have come to understand the form and function of journals in expanded ways. My main "journal writing" in Spanish is in the form of email, with some entries just a few lines long. I don't currently write journals in Spanish by hand, although I certainly could. (Why could I not write my daily excessively boring and often very short journal entries in Spanish, or partly in Spanish instead of in English? Why could I not throw in a few words and phrases in Japanese kana or in my disappearing French? Why could I not ponder some of my writing topics, challenges, and dilemmas using a mix of all these languages? Why could I not communicate occasionally with my L1 and L2 doctoral students in Japan, even briefly, in a bit of Japanese?)

Hmmm. So at the end of this journal on journal writing, and at this late stage of my academic career, it seems there is quite a bit left I could do to practice what I preach. *Demo mokuteki ga nan desuka?* Role model? Lifelong learning? Enjoyment and intellectual stimulation? *Zenbu? Ganbarimash*ō.

Author Bio

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