

Can Diary Exchange Lead Students to Become Engaged in English Writing?

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Abstract

This study attempts to investigate to what extent writing an exchange diary on a regular basis influences English language learners' motivation, attitudes, and habits. This action research took place in a university writing class in Japan that met twice a week. In the first class of the week, after being randomly paired up with a partner, students wrote a diary entry out of class that included questions for the partner. In the following class, they exchanged diaries, then took home the partner's diary and wrote an entry that answered the questions. In the next class, they returned the diary to its owner. This series of procedures was called "one boomerang" and was the minimum weekly work assigned to each pair. The boomerang procedure was repeated for a period of three months. The teacher maintained the role of facilitator and did not intervene in the content of each diary entry. Data were gathered through two questionnaires with free comments. The results indicate that the diary exchange contributed to the increased enjoyment and speed with which students wrote in English. Although the average motivation level towards writing in English did not show any great quantitative jump, most of the students reported favorably about diary exchange in their comments.

要旨

本研究は学生同士で定期的に行う英語での交換日記が、英語を書くことに対する学生の動機づけや態度、習慣に影響を及ぼすのか、またその場合どの程度の影響があるかを明らかにすることを目的としている。アクションリサーチである本研究は、ある日本の大学のライティングクラス（週二回）で行われた。まず、学生は各週の最初の授業でカードによりペア分けされ、ペアの相手への質問も含めた日記を授業外で書いた。そして次の授業で、お互いに日記を交換し家に持ち帰り、ペアの相手の質問に対する返事を記入した上で返却した（これを1ブーメランと呼び、これを最低限のノルマとした）。この活動を実践した3か月間、教師は進行役に徹し、日記の内容には介入しないと約束した。2回のアンケートデータを分析した結果、英語での交換日記は学生達の英語を書くスピードの向上に役立つことが示された一方で、英語を書くことに対する動機づけに関しては数値上大きな伸びは見せなかったが、この活動に対する好意的な意見が多くの子のコメントに見られた。

Keywords: diary exchange, learning strategy training, writing habits, learner development

交換日記, 学習方略トレーニング, ライティングの習慣, 学習者の成長

Though students recognize that English is an important communication tool, many still approach English as a code to be deciphered; by analyzing the language and learning pattern sentences by rote. Fiercely competitive entrance exams and pervasive grammar-translation teaching practices have only contributed to this mindset. It is not surprising that few students read English for pleasure and even fewer write English outside the classroom. As of 2020, Japan will start English classes in third grade elementary school and make English a compulsory subject for fifth graders. I truly hope that this will create opportunities for educators to re-examine how English is taught in schools. Perhaps students will come to a better understanding of English not only as a communication tool, but also as a vehicle of discovery so that, rather than studying English for its own sake, they can use English to discover and expand on their own interests and connect those interests with others'. This kind of meaningful learning is an important principle of learner-interest driven language learning and teaching. It is crucial to "capitalize on the power of meaningful learning by appealing to students' interests" (Brown, 2001, p. 57). Brown also stresses the significance of risk-taking, mentioning that "successful language learners...must be willing to become 'gamblers' in the game of language" (p. 63). When developing productive skills such as speaking and writing, making mistakes is inevitable. Naturally, students do not usually want to make mistakes, but if the activity is related to what interests them, they might be able to get over their unwillingness to take risks.

Overcoming this reluctance provides opportunities for students to engage in skill building. Nuttal (1996) emphasizes the importance of building these skills, particularly reading skills to avoid the vicious circle where those who are poor at reading are not willing to read much, and because they do not read, they do not find reading enjoyable. Day and Bamford (1998) claim that you improve your reading skills only through actual reading where you learn various pieces of knowledge prerequisite to be a fluent reader. The same could be said for writing. Teachers should help students escape from the cycle where the less they write, the less they are able to write. The key seems to be encouraging students to write whatever they want to write. This is where the activity of diary exchange comes in. In a diary exchange, students can write whatever they want to write. Furthermore, students interact with peers of the same age and who share similar interests. Unlike conventional writing assignments, diary exchange provides students with more incentives to write in English.

In addition, diary writing is an effective learning strategy. Unfortunately, it is also an underutilized one. Defined as "a range of specific learning techniques that make learning more effective" (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 95), learning strategy training "aims to make everyone more capable of independent learning" (Dickinson, 1992, p. 13). Learning autonomously is important for success in language acquisition because the amount of time students can spend in the classroom is limited. Research indicates a close relationship between the amount of teacher support for student autonomy and an increase in student autonomy (see Noels, Cimet, & Pelletier, 1999). One challenge for teachers is to provide students chances to try various learning strategies so that they can choose from them some that they want to adopt or adapt for future learning. However, there is some disagreement among researchers about the effectiveness of learner strategy training. Some say that there exists no verifiable evidence that awareness of strategies promotes L2 learning success (see Rees-Miller, 1993). There is no promise that students will continue using a certain learning strategy, as in this case of writing a diary, because there is no definitive strategy that fits everyone. What teachers can do is to help students widen their repertoire of learning strategies. Macaro (2006) suggests that "successful learning is...linked...to his or her orchestration of

strategies available to him or her” (Macaro, 2006, p. 332) and that “strategies do not make learning more efficient; they are the raw material without which L2 learning cannot take place” (op. cit.).

Specifically for writing, Ward’s (2004) blog project in a writing/reading class at an American university revealed that the use of blogs contributed to the increased interest of students in reading and writing. The feedback from students was mostly positive, saying that writing a blog assisted their learning. Pinkman’s (2005) qualitative study using blogs in an integrated skills class at a Japanese university showed that 7 out of 15 learners admitted that the project improved their writing skills, saying the project prompted them to use new vocabulary. Students in Pinkman’s study reported that they liked the activity so much they wanted to continue blogging. More than half of the participants found the comments from classmates and the teacher motivating.

In the current study, I incorporated a learner training approach featuring diary exchange, with the hope that students would feel that the more they wrote, the more they would want to write, and that they would adopt English writing for their learning. In order to give them the maximum autonomy, I avoided any intervention on the content of the diary entries that they wrote. As diary exchange, compared with conventional writing exercises, requires another person, I thought that peer pressure through being required to exchange their diary entries would work positively and encourage the students to become more engaged in writing in English.

Learning from students’ perceptions of diary exchanges

When explaining Galileo’s law of inertia, people often give an example of a running train. Passengers on a train continue to move in the same direction unless they are acted upon by an external force. What I hoped to make happen in the classroom runs along the same line: The teacher gets the class in the mood for diary exchange and creates a sense of camaraderie. As the diary exchange activity gains momentum, students will get so used to it that they have it ingrained in them to the extent of feeling awkward without it. With the help of positive peer pressure, a virtuous circle is formed, and students will keep exchanging diaries involving each other in a reiterative, self-propagating process. In other words, I wanted to know if it was possible to attain something as hard as making students write for three months, and if the completion of the activity would consequently change students’ perspectives about writing.

This study was conducted at a university in a Japanese metropolitan area. The participants consisted of 22 freshmen (7 males and 15 females) enrolled in an English writing class that met twice a week. In the first class, I gave the students a questionnaire consisting of five Likert-scale items intended to probe their motivation, attitudes, and habits of English learning (see Appendix A) in order to know to what degree students enjoy writing as well as what attitudes, habits of or preoccupations with writing prevent them from experiencing the fun of writing. The students were asked to get hold of an A4 size notebook and bring it to the following class. In the second class, I explained the procedures of diary exchange before the students wrote a diary entry (at least one fourth of a page) in their own notebook with some questions for their partner. In the next class, they exchanged notebooks, took their partner’s questions back home, and wrote another diary entry, but this time in their partner’s notebook and with answers to the questions. I told the students that it was okay to write about anything ranging from what they did at university, their favorite pastime, childhood memories, to their dreams. A single exchange was called “one boomerang”: Student A writes a diary entry, hands it to Student B, who returns it like a boomerang to Student A. I assured the class that it was not the content of the entry that counted but the number of

diary entries that would contribute toward their final grade. The crucial thing for me was to make sure the students understood the importance and enjoyment of expressing themselves in English and that they did not have to be afraid of making mistakes.

From there on, in the first class of each week, the students were paired up using playing cards, and the pairs sat next to each other for occasional collaboration. These pairs lasted until the following week, when pairs were re-shuffled. At the beginning of every class, I had the students open the newest page of their A4 notebook so that I could simply and quickly check if they had an entry (no error correction or comments were made). Finally, at the end of the course, the initial questionnaire was re-administered. I also asked the students to count the number of diary entries (both their own entries and their partner's).

Exploring student responses about diary entries

Quantitatively, an independent t-test was conducted to compare the students' English writing motivation, attitudes, and habits. Results showed a slight, non-significant, difference from Survey 1 ($M=3.04$, $SD=0.89$) to Survey 2 ($M=3.22$, $SD=0.92$), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Changes in Student Motivation (Survey Question 3: "I like writing in English")

	N	Mean	SD	t
Survey 1	22	3.04	0.89	0.78 ($p = 0.444$)
Survey 2	22	3.22	0.92	

In contrast, students' writing habits (see Table 2 below) revealed significant difference from Survey 1 ($M=2.14$, $SD=1.04$) to Survey 2 ($M=2.82$, $SD=0.92$). This finding featured a medium effect size ($d=0.70$).

Table 2. Changes in Student Writing Habits (Survey Question 6: "Writing in English takes me a lot of time")

	N	Mean	SD	t
Survey 1	22	2.14	1.04	2.32 ($p = 0.025$)
Survey 2	22	2.82	0.92	

By analyzing the students' responses to the first questionnaire, with the aim of understanding what habits prevent students from experiencing the fun of writing in English, I was able to identify some common perceptions across the class. First, even though all the students to some extent admitted that writing in English is a good way to improve English skills (*Strongly agree* 55%, *Agree* 40%, *Slightly agree* 5%), 64% of the students more or less thought that writing in English is something they should do after building vocabulary and improving grammar skills (*Strongly agree* 5%, *Agree* 36%, *Slightly agree* 23%). In other words, they had put off doing what they believed they should do. Second, 77% of the students said that when writing in English, they first think of a Japanese sentence and translate it into English (*Very*

often 14%, Often 41%, Sometimes 22%), and 86% of the students agreed that writing English takes a lot of time to a greater or lesser degree (*Strongly agree* 32%, *Agree* 36%, *Slightly agree* 18%). At the start of the diary exchange, they seemed to be unable to kick the ingrained habit of a word-by-word translation, which naturally hinders them from writing fast, let alone having a positive image toward writing.

Changes in the students

Qualitatively, the majority of the students had favorable reactions toward their experiences with the diary exchange. A number of students noted that the diary exchange helped them think in a different way about communicating in English. Satoshi (all names are pseudonyms) commented, for example, that he realized the benefits of using common expressions in writing:

“What has changed after this activity is that English phrases pop up in my mind more often than before. Rather than translating Japanese sentences into English, I think it is better to use common English expressions even if the intended meaning changes a little bit.” - Satoshi

Other students observed that, in addition to thinking differently, they enjoyed the interaction with peers that the diary exchange facilitated:

“I believe that writing in English is a good way to nurture the ability to think in English. However, unless you brush up vocabulary through extensive reading, it does not have enough effect because you tend to write the same things again and again. So, it is important to gain a lot of input and use it when outputting ... What was good about this activity was that I was able to get to know my partners. It often happened that conversations with them followed a lively course after the exchange of diaries” - Ryuichi

“I liked it that with this diary exchange, I had an opportunity to write what I usually do not share with others. Thanks to this activity, I was able to improve my writing skills while having fun of learning about new aspects of my classmates. - Maiko

“It was a lot of fun to write a diary. Talking about what happened during the day and my favorite things helped me be on good terms with my classmates. This activity has given me not only a chance to review English grammar but also a chance to check out ordinary English expressions and use them. - Ai

These comments reveal how the diary exchange contributed to the affective aspects of their writing, with the power of camaraderie being the driving force of their completion of this activity.

Some explained what was happening while writing from a metacognitive standpoint, which shows that they had started looking at writing from new perspectives:

“What I think is good about writing a diary is that you can visualize what you are thinking. If you understand what weaknesses you have, you can work on them. Whenever I did not know how to say something in English, I looked it up in my dictionary, which led to expanded knowledge. Every time my hand stops, I know it is a sign of my inability to express it in English, which is really educational. Unlike a conversation, there is no interlocutor in front of me, so I can write at my own pace. At first, filling out one-fourth of a page was not easy, but after a while, it became easier to write. I find it a good thing that whenever I read what I have written before, I can feel my growth as a writer.” - Hinako

“At first I was worried that I might not be able to continue writing a diary in English because I hadn’t even written a diary in Japanese. But to my surprise, after starting to do it, I found my pen moving more smoothly than I expected. By occasionally consulting my dictionary, I was able to learn expressions that I had not used before. I am happy that I have acquired a habit of writing English.” - Atsushi

Overall, many of the students recognized the benefits to this kind of interactive exchange between writers and readers. Some even reflected on their performance and wrote about how they had been able to improve their diary entries:

“Initially, I had an awareness that I was not good at writing English, but I gradually got used to it. As time went by, I found it a lot of fun to write what I am thinking. There are also some things I should have done better. The questions to ask my partners were always basic.” - Yamato

Moving from inertia to engagement

The diary exchange seems to have prompted the students who participated in the class to improve their writing fluently to some degree. Furthermore, quite a few students reacted favorably toward this activity. In the follow-up questionnaire, 95% of students strongly agreed or agreed with the statement “Receiving feedback on my writing is a positive experience.” All students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I think keeping a diary in English will help me think in English,” and 86% of students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I will try to write in English as often as possible.”

What is worth noting is that nobody dropped out and the average number of diary entries in students’ notebooks during the semester (the combined number of diary entries of both owner and partner) was 25.5. This is surprising, considering the fact that if they completed one boomerang every week, the number of diary entries would be 24. By writing what they wanted to write, the students were able to go beyond their own restricted linguistic resources and became “gamblers” who take chances and are not afraid of making mistakes. I must also unfortunately add, however, that there was one student who was skeptical about learning writing in the classroom at all, saying that speaking is far more significant than writing. This student believed that there will be many more chances to speak rather than write in English in the future. That said, he reluctantly admitted to the usefulness of exchange diary itself in that he was able to find out his weaknesses in grammar.

Earlier, I likened this study to the running train used in explaining Galileo’s law of inertia; needless to say, learning a language is different from physics in that it does not proceed as calculated. The degree to which students benefit from the same activity differs significantly. Nonetheless, what is important is that had it not been for this opportunity, some students would probably have graduated from university without realizing the fun of writing about themselves in their own words in English. From exploring how these students took to diary writing and diary exchange, I feel even more strongly now that as writing teachers we should guide English learners to get out of the shell of their preconceived notions that English is a mere synonym for boring analysis or wearisome word-by-word translation so that they can engage with expressing themselves enjoyably through writing.

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Appendix A English Writing Motivation, Attitudes, and Habits Questionnaire

1. Writing in English is a good way to improve my English skills.
(英語で書くことは英語力を伸ばすための良い方法である。)
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Slightly agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
2. Writing in English is something I should do after building vocabulary and improving grammar skills.
(英語で書くことは語彙力を付け、文法力を伸ばした後で行うべきことである。)
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Slightly agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
3. I like writing in English.
(英語で書くことが好きだ。)
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Slightly agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
4. I feel that reading English is a kind of deciphering a code rather than a way to get information.
(英語を読むことは情報を得るというよりも、暗号の解読のように感じる。)
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Slightly agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
5. When I read, I move my eyes from left to right, without having my eyes go backward and forward.
(英語を読む際には前に戻ったりせず、左から右に語順の通りに読む。)
☐ Very often ☐ Often ☐ Sometimes ☐ Rarely ☐ Never
6. Writing English takes me a lot of time.
(英語を書くのにとっても時間がかかる。)
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Slightly agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
7. When I write in English, I first think of Japanese sentences and then translate them.
(英語で書く際には、まず日本語で考えてからそれを訳す。)
☐ Very often ☐ Often ☐ Sometimes ☐ Rarely ☐ Never
8. Receiving feedback on my writing is a positive experience.
(自分が書いたものに対して感想を貰うことは、プラスの体験である。)
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Slightly agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
9. I think keeping a diary in English will help me think in English.
(英語で日記を付けることは英語で物を考えるための助けになると思う。)
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Slightly agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
10. I think reading English will help me improve my writing skills.
(英語を読むことはライティングの力を伸ばす助けになると思う。)
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Slightly agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

11. I will try to write in English as often as possible.

(できるだけ頻繁に英語で書くようにしようと思う。)

☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Slightly agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

12. Writing in English is high on my agenda.

(私の中で、英語で書くことの優先順位は高い。)

☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Slightly agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

13. Please write how you feel about writing in English.

(英語で書くことについて、感じていることを書いて下さい。)

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