
Poster Presentation

Diary Writing for Science Majors: Students' Perception of the Potential for Language Improvement

Mohammad N. Maleki

Kanazawa Institute of Technology

Brent Wright

Kanazawa Institute of Technology

In preparation to study abroad, 10 science and engineering major university students were required to keep a daily diary for three months. Topic choice was left up to students, and they often chose to write about research they were conducting related to their major. Each student met weekly with an English tutor and the diaries were a starting point for these tutoring sessions. Positive attitudes towards the effectiveness of diary writing to improve English were evident from the results of a questionnaire administered to the participants. Overall, the science and engineering students perceived diary writing to be an effective way to improve their English abilities, and in particular, their vocabulary knowledge.

A diary is “a set of notes about what one is thinking, doing, feeling at a particular moment” (Rubin, 2003, p. 10). Also it can be “a written account of a person’s thoughts, activities and experiences recorded daily or every few weeks” (Johnson, 2002, p. 46). It is a technique that has been used in language classes for decades. The EFL teachers at the school where this study took place used diary writing to help prepare science and engineering candidates for an extended study abroad program. Both graduate and undergraduate students at this school can apply for this program to study in the United States for one semester. Before being accepted to become a candidate for the program, students are required to display their desire to study abroad and talk about how they plan to use English

for their future careers. They do this by writing an essay and participating in an interview, both in English. The researchers were not part of the selection process for candidacy. Once students are accepted as study abroad candidates, they must successfully complete the following requirements:

- Write a daily diary in English and submit it to tutors
- Participate in weekly tutoring sessions with EFL tutors
- Give a refereed presentation in English about their prospective schools

In addition to these requirements, students must complete a three-month course covering English language and American culture topics. The course and other requirements took place over the same period of time but were not directly related to one another. The tutors were all EFL instructors at the same university as the students.

Several studies conducted in the EFL context have measured learners' perception and attitudes towards learning English using diary writing. Barjesteh, Vaseghi, and Gholami (2011) found that attitudes toward writing in English improved for those who kept a diary compared to those who did not. Kırkgöz (2009) had prospective English teachers keep a diary for the duration of a vocabulary focused course and concluded that keeping the diary helped them to become more autonomous in their learning as they discovered their own learning strategies.

The goal of this paper is to investigate these study abroad candidate students' perceptions regarding the usage of diary writing as a technique to improve their overall English ability.

Method

Study Abroad Program Requirements

The participants in this study were 10 non-English major students (first-year graduate students and third-year undergraduates) at a Japanese four-year university. They were motivated in the sense that they wanted to improve their English enough to go through the time consuming process of applying to become candidates for the program and then completing the program.

Students were asked to submit either a hard or soft copy of a daily diary to

their tutors. Students were instructed that each entry should be about half a page in length and that the content could be about anything that was going on in their daily lives. Students wrote about a variety of topics, ranging from daily activities and their hometowns to the research they were conducting for their major. Tutors used the diaries in the tutoring sessions to discuss any necessary language-related points with the students. Student received a pass or fail grade based on giving a presentation in English about the university they would be studying at in the United States, their completion of the course work, participating in tutoring sessions with EFL tutors, writing daily diary entries, and a recommendation from their tutor.

Data Collection and Instruments

A five-point Likert scale questionnaire (roughly modeled after Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, and McKeachie, 1991) was designed to measure students' perceptions toward using diary writing to improve their English abilities (see Appendix). Students completed the survey questionnaire at the end of the course, and since it was given in English, they were encouraged to ask questions for clarification. There were 19 items on the questionnaire which dealt with a variety of language learning areas. For the purpose of this study, we used seven questions related specifically to students' perceptions regarding diary writing as a way to improve their English. The data was compiled from the questionnaire results and analyzed using an Excel spreadsheet to identify trends in students' perceptions.

Results

Students were asked to rate the items of the survey questionnaire by circling 1~5 (Not true ~ Always true).

Results from the questionnaire indicate that overall (average of all items: 3.8 out of 5), students perceived diary writing as a slightly positive influence on improving their English language ability. The above table shows that students thought their vocabulary knowledge can be improved ($x = 4.3$) and that they were able to use new grammar and vocabulary ($x = 4.2$) as a result of writing diary entries. Since students often wrote about their major research, the entries

often included technical terms. They would then talk about their research in the tutoring sessions. As students do not often write or talk about their area of specialty in normal English classes, this was an opportunity for them to use technical vocabulary, both in writing and speaking. This is why we believe these two areas scored the highest. Moreover, the results also show that some students ($x = 3.8$) believed diary writing enabled them to improve their skills in identifying their mistakes and correcting them on their own.

Discussion

We believe that several aspects of diary writing are conducive for improving learners' vocabulary knowledge, and that this is why students reported it as having the most benefit of writing regular diary entries.

In the traditional language classrooms, the teacher decides which vocabulary students will learn. This may be based on the text material being utilized in the classroom. In the case of a diary entry, the task is to generate a personal text which is based on the writer's experiences. We can assume that since the topic is directly related to the learner, he or she is intrinsically interested in the topic and is motivated to express the content in a meaningful way. If the learner lacks the vocabulary to express this, he or she will have to look the words up in a Japanese-English dictionary. The target vocabulary is determined by the students because of its direct relevance to their immediate communication needs. Students try to produce the new words in a meaningful way. In the classroom, students may try to learn the words from a list that was provided by the teacher and then apply that knowledge only in an assessment which is determined by the teacher.

In the context of diary writing and the tutoring sessions, a student desiring to express something, but lacking the vocabulary knowledge to do so, had to search for a new word to express his or her thought, and then received feedback from the tutor. No feedback would indicate that the word usage was correct and that the thought was accurately expressed. Specific feedback in the form of correction would guide the student toward using the word correctly. Assuming the student is motivated, which was the case in our study, this process provides a rich opportunity for students to increase their vocabulary knowledge as they

write and also as they use the new words in subsequent entries.

The findings from this study suggest that motivated students recognize the potential for improving various aspects of their English ability, particularly vocabulary acquisition and use, through diary writing. It can be beneficial to tailor diary writing activities to target vocabulary learning, as is shown in Kirkgöz's (2009) study which investigates prospective English teachers keeping a diary to record their learning in a vocabulary class. However, if we view vocabulary improvement as a byproduct of diary writing, then we should continue to encourage students to write more and to try using new words. It may be beneficial to have students point out the new words they used, perhaps by underlining, and then to acknowledge their efforts. Corrective feedback on word usage should be given in tandem with recognizing students' efforts to use new words. We also believe that providing students with regular written and oral feedback on their entries might lead to students becoming more independent and recognizing their mistakes.

Overall, students showed a positive attitude toward using diary writing to improve their English, which is in line with findings by Barjesteh et al. (2011) which concluded that diary writing can have an influence on students' attitude toward writing. Writing, in general, is considered "a complex skill that requires practice for improvement" (Hull, 1981, p. 135). Diary writing can be a starting point for EFL learners to improve their English ability, especially in expanding their vocabulary knowledge.

Limitations

Due to the relatively small number of participants in this study and only basic statistical analysis (finding the means) the results must be interpreted with caution. We are relatively confident that the positive results stated above apply to the 10 science and engineering students in this study. Further studies will be necessary to come to more general conclusions about students' perceptions of diary writing. Also, investigating the contents of students' diary entries and the conversations that took place during the tutoring sessions could provide rich data about whether students' vocabulary usage actually improved. Unfortunately, that was beyond the scope of this study.

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Author bios

Mohammad Naeim Maleki is an Essential English Center instructor at Kanazawa Institute of Technology. He has taught English language in Afghanistan, the USA and Japan. His research area has been focused on English writing methodologies and learner autonomy. He was awarded a Fulbright scholarship and completed an M.A. degree in TESOL from Saint Michael's College, USA. malekinaeim@gmail.com

Brent Wright is an Essential English Center instructor at Kanazawa Institute of Technology. He has taught Japanese in the USA for 10 years and English in Japan for three years. He received his M.A. in Japanese Language and Pedagogy from the University of Oregon. brentwright.kit@gmail.com

Received: November 16, 2014

Accepted: September 11, 2015

Appendix

Student Questionnaire

Write a number based on your opinion about the diary writing activity.

Not true		Sometimes true		Not true
1	2	3	4	5

1. Diary writing enables me to improve my grammar.
2. Diary writing enables me to improve my writing speed.
3. Diary writing enables me to learn new vocabulary words.
4. Diary writing enables me to improve my reading ability.
5. Diary writing enables me to improve my speaking ability.
6. I think I will be able to use diary writing to learn basic communication skills.
7. Diary writing will improve my confidence in using English.
8. I found it easy to think of things to write about.
9. It was not a burden to write every day.
10. After the teacher gave me feedback, I corrected my mistakes.
11. Diary writing will help me prepare for studying abroad.
12. Diary writing is useful as a reflection tool.
13. Diary writing is helpful for learning English.
14. I think my English has improved as a result of this diary writing activity.
15. I regularly keep an English diary, even before beginning this activity.
16. I read over my diary to check for mistakes.
17. I would like to keep an English diary, even after this activity.
18. I try to use new grammar forms and vocabulary words in my writing.
19. After this activity, I became able to correct some of my own mistakes.