

Diary Writing for Science Majors: The Potential for Language Improvement



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Introduction

Summary

In preparation to study abroad, 10 science and engineering major university students were required to keep a daily diary for three months. Each student met with an English tutor, weekly, 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 the questionnaire and interview. Examining student writing samples showed evidence of improvement in content and mechanics.

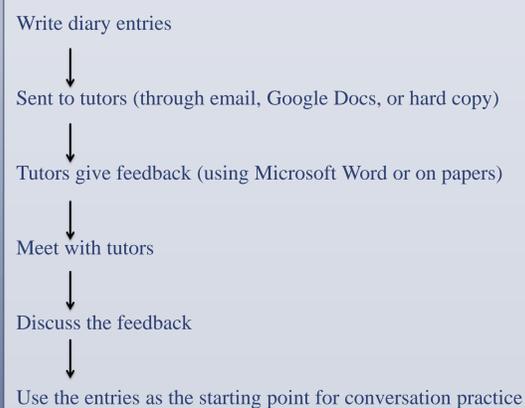
Subjects and Setting

The participants were 10 EFL non-English major students at a Japanese four-year university. They were motivated graduate and undergraduate learners.

Prerequisites for studying abroad:

- Three-month course on language and culture
- Writing daily diary entries
- Weekly tutoring sessions
- Presentation about prospective school

Diary Writing Steps:



Research Questions

1. What is students' perception of using diary writing as a tool to improve their English ability?
2. Were there any improvements in students' writing quality, if so, in what ways?

Methods and Procedures

The instruments were validated by experts in the field for content and construct validity prior to distribution. The survey questionnaire was distributed to the participants at the end of the course and they were allowed to ask questions for clarification.

The participants were interviewed at the end of the course in Japanese.

The writing samples of the learners were collected from tutors at the end of the course.

Data Collection

Instruments:

➤ Survey Questionnaire:

A five-point Likert scale questionnaire (roughly modeled after Pintrich et al., 1991) designed to measure students' perceptions towards using diary writing to improve their English abilities.

➤ Interview:

The participants were interviewed in Japanese to find out whether students felt their English improved or not, and if so, in what ways.

➤ Students' Diary Writing Samples:

Students' writing samples from the first and last week of the course were compared to find out whether there were improvements in students' writing quality, and if so, in what ways.

Data Analysis

➤ Quantitative data was compiled from the questionnaire results and analyzed using an Excel spreadsheet to identify trends in students' perceptions.

➤ Qualitative data was compiled from students' early and later writing samples and analyzed for improvement in English. Additionally, student responses to interview questions were analyzed to gain insight into their perceptions about their English improvement.

Discussion and Results

A diary is "a set of notes about what one is thinking, doing, feeling at a particular moment" (Rubin, 2003, p. 10). It is used in different capacities by teachers and researchers. As part of the prerequisites for passing this course, the participant wrote daily diaries and submitted to tutors and met with them weekly.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed and the following results were found:

Survey Questionnaire Results:

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

Table 1: Results of students' perceptions of diary writing

Diary writing enables me to:	Mean
improve my grammar	3.7
improve my writing speed	3.6
learn new vocabulary words	4.3
improve my reading ability	3.4
improve my speaking ability	3.5
learn basic communication skills	3.7
improve confidence in using English	3.8
prepare for studying abroad	4.2
use my entries as a reflection tool	4.2
correct my own mistakes	3.8

The above table shows that students ($x = 4.3$) thought their vocabulary knowledge can be improved as the result of diary entries.

Furthermore, the results show that students felt diary writing is useful in preparation for studying abroad ($x = 4.2$) and they can use it as a reflection tool ($x = 4.2$).

Results from another item of the questionnaire shows that the students ($x = 4.2$) felt positive that diary writing is a helpful tool for learning English.

Interview Results:

Students were asked in the interview whether their English writing improved because of this course, and if so, in what ways. Their responses show that they thought diary writing had positive impact on their writing improvement in the following areas:

- ✓ Able to express self better
- ✓ Word choice
- ✓ Confidence

Writing Samples Results:

Analyzing the students' early and late writing samples, the following results were found:

➤ *Content*: More in depth topics

➤ *Word Choice*: Variety of words

➤ *Mechanics*: There were positive changes in the usage of mechanics such as prepositions, punctuation, and capitalization.

Conclusion

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 writing ability.

Results revealed that:

Research Question # 1:

Results indicate that students recognize the potential for diaries to improve their English, especially the content and mechanics of their writing.

Research Question # 2:

Comparing early and later students' diary writing samples, we found that some students wrote more in depth about their topics in later entries than in earlier entries and used more complex grammar forms.

Overall results revealed that there were improvements in students' writing quality, which is in line with Barjesteh, Vaseghi and Gholami's (2011) findings which concluded that diary writing improved EFL college students' writing.

Further findings:

- Confidence
- The ability to express self better

Suggestions: The participants' tutors suggested the followings for enhancing better implementation of diary writing:

- Make diary entries weekly rather than daily which is also suggested by Rubin (2003).
- Sharing diaries on Blogs or Facebook groups for peer feedback.
- Can be implemented best in small size classes so conferencing can occur.

References

- Barjesteh, H., Vaseghi, R., and Gholami, R. (2011). The effect of diary writing on EFL college students' writing improvement and attitudes. *International Conference on Language, Literature and Linguistics*, 26, pp. 143-147
- Hull, G. A. (1981). Effect of self-management strategies on journal writing by college freshmen. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 15(2), pp.135-148.
- Pintrich, P. R., Smith, D. A. F., Garcia, T., and McKeachie, W. J. (1991). A Manual for the Use of the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ), National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning, Ann Arbor, MI.
- Rubin, J. (2003). Diary writing as a process: Simple, useful, powerful. *Guidelines*, 25(2), 10-14.

Students' Writing Samples: (hard copies will be provided on site)