

## The Effectiveness of Journal Writing in Learning Japanese in a University Setting

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Numerous case studies have reported on the effectiveness of journal writing in various fields since the late 1960s. Journal writing has been used not only in language arts subjects but also in non-language fields in order to develop learners' knowledge in respective subject areas. In particular, many studies have concentrated on the use of journals in various levels of ESL (English as a Second Language) classes. However, although there are many studies showing that journal writing is an excellent tool to improve students' language acquisition, little has been reported on the use of the journal in foreign-language learning. This paper explores a new area of journal writing research in a foreign-language setting and shows evidence of effectiveness of journal writing at an early stage of learning Japanese as a foreign language.

The paper examines the effectiveness of journal writing in an introductory Japanese-language course conducted at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, from 1991 to 1993. Students were encouraged to try to use the language they had learned in order to communicate with native speakers. Students were instructed that the focus on the journal writing was on its content and not on the accuracy of their language use. They were given freedom to choose any topic of their interest and write about it.

This paper provides evidence indicating that journal writing is an effective tool in developing language skills even at an early stage of foreign-language learning. I believe that this student-centered quality of journal writing is one of the key elements of its growing use over more traditional teacher-centered approach.

### INTRODUCTION

Journal writing in language and non-language fields continues to be an interesting area of research in the field of language acquisition and communication. Many

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studies have shown that journal writing is an excellent tool for improving students' language acquisition. It was expected that, through journal writing, students could express their feelings, opinions, and reactions toward the subject matter with greater ease. The journal writing, it was thought, would allow students to freely express their opinions and enable them to better communicate with the teachers on the subject under consideration.

Although many studies have analyzed the effectiveness of journal writing in the context of English as a second language, little has been reported on the use of journal writing in foreign-language learning at early levels, especially Japanese as a foreign language. Accordingly, the main purpose of this paper is to report on my use of journal writing in Japanese teaching in a foreign-language setting. The paper examines the effectiveness of journal writing in an introductory Japanese-language course conducted at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, from 1991 to 1993. The purpose is intended to provide evidence that journals can also be effective at an early stage of learning Japanese as a foreign language.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: The next section provides a summary of previous research. It is intended not only to provide existing evidence on the use and effectiveness of journal writing, but also to provide the context for the evidence provided in this paper. Next, I provide the main purpose of this study, and discuss the relevant background about the environmental setting of the course, its participants, and the course structure in which journal writing was considered as an integral part of the learning process. The next section provides details on the type and timing of the journal writing, which is followed by my observations on students' journals. In this section, I provide some concrete examples of journal entries by the students and draw some conclusions about the obvious changes in students' increased ability in the usage of vocabulary and writing skills. Since the paper is of a qualitative nature, I also describe some areas of surprise and some disappointments. In the next section, I provide a partial summary of student feedback on the usage and effectiveness of journal writing from their learning perspective, followed by a section on my conclusions on some other advantages of journal writing and some problems that I encountered during the two years of my experience with journal writing. The paper ends with conclusions.

### Previous Research

The effectiveness of journal writing has been examined since the late 1960s in various academic disciplines. Toby Fulwiler (1987) pointed out in *The Journal Book* that "The skilful educator makes use of 'learners' own easy talky' language for learning wherever she finds it — and the journal is one of the handiest places. Such journals have become recognized useful pedagogical tools in other disciplines" (p. 1).

There have been numerous cases where teachers have used journals to communicate in many subject areas with students whose native language was English. The first formalized and comprehensive study of dialogue journals in a classroom setting was undertaken in 1979 in the classroom of Leslee Reed in Los Angeles, California.

She had begun the practice of interactive written communication in the form of dialogue journals with her sixth-grade students sometime in the mid-1960s. Jana Staton, in collaboration with Roger Shuy, Joy Kreeft Peyton, and Leslee Reed, completed the comprehensive report (1982) of the study of 26 dialogue journals from Reed's 1979–80 class, focusing on the context and characteristics of the students' writing from a variety of perspectives.

Many language arts subjects such as literature, philosophy, and history also provided the opportunity for journal writing. Some of the non-language arts subjects, such as physics and mathematics, have also used journal writing in the curriculum in order to help students promote their thinking skills in the learning process (Jensen, 1987). In these disciplines, journals are almost like learning logs or workbooks to record both what happened and students' own assessments of their progress. In this context, the role of journals is to help both students and teachers understand any general learning issues, including those that may be related to the comprehension of the subject matter itself. Journal writing has also been effectively incorporated for non-oral language instruction for deaf students as well. It is claimed that the use of the journal writing in this situation provided enormous confidence and encouragement to deaf students in their language acquisition (Albertini, 1990).

Based on these studies, it is clear that the use of dialogue journals has been very successful. Possibly as a result of this apparent success, many teachers in the ESL community have started using journal writing in their classrooms as well. The first comprehensive study documented with ESL students also came from Leslee Reed's class when she was transferred in 1980–81 to a school with ESL students, most of whom had recently immigrated to the United States from all over the world. The encouraging results of the study by Peyton et al. (1984) also generated tremendous interest in the use of journal writing in the ESL community. Since then, numerous ESL programs have incorporated the journal writing as an integral part of the curriculum to acquire necessary language skills at different levels of English, starting from a beginner's level to an advanced level.

The use of dialogue journal writing at different levels in ESL learning has varied across studies. In one very detailed study of beginning ESL students, Peyton (1990) examined the dialogue journal writing of five sixth-grade students from Reed's class in Los Angeles. The study focused on the acquisition of English grammatical morphemes as reflected in the student-generated, relatively un-monitored writing done over a 10-month period. The five students, chosen out of a class of 26 from 12 different countries and 10 different language backgrounds, were selected because they had been in the United States for less than one year prior to the writing of their journals. Their first languages were Burmese, Italian, and Korean.

Journal writing was carried out as a supplementary activity by these students during their free time throughout the day. Peyton carefully analyzed the data on the acquisition of six verb-related and four noun-related morphemes in the journals. These morphemes were chosen because "they stood out as part of the developing language competence of these students" (Peyton, 1990: 74).

Peyton concluded that the study of morpheme acquisition as reflected in their

dialogue journal writing is comparable to most previous morphemes studies. There was considerable uniformity in acquisition order of these morphemes between her study and previous studies, which indicated there is a universal pattern of acquisition. Reed has proposed that the existing considerable individual variation in students' language acquisition process seems to be a result of first-language transfer. Thus, she warns teachers not to expect all students to perform alike even though they are given the same classroom instructions. She also argues that even beginning ESL learners can compose and express themselves in written English long before they have mastered its forms and structures in meaningful texts and that they continue to develop in these areas through journal writing process. She concludes that dialogue journals reflect changes in students' language proficiency over time.

There are also several studies examining the effectiveness of journal writing in more advanced levels. The studies reported by Vanette and Jurich (1990) and Lucas (1990) involved a group of adult ESL learners in the program called "Writing for Fluency" offered through the English Fluency Program of San Francisco State University's Extended Education Program. The students in this program included graduate and undergraduate students, as well as non-native English speaking professionals already working or planning to enter the job market. The curriculum was designed to build on the wealth of the students' previous experience and knowledge base. In this program, personal journal writing was assigned as a core activity in an adult ESL writing course. Teachers also wrote journals and shared their journals with students so that they were not just the observers of or commentators on students' writing but also became collaborators in this writing exercise.

This program also looked at journal writing as a particular "genre" through which students could learn a set of features of form, content, and use of the target language and also learn to be aware of an audience in their writing. Students began writing journals on personal topics because they could write on various subjects based on their own experience. They would then apply their ability to write on personal topics to develop skills necessary to meet their requirements in life. Thus, Jurich and Lucas conclude that classroom personal journal writing can have positive effects on students' engagement with other genres, such as academic essays, business letters, resumes with covering letters, etc.

Vanett and Jurich also argue that personal journal writing can be an effective tool to improve students' academic writing skills when it is used as an integral part of the curriculum. Previously, they found that the students did rather poorly in academic writing although they produced good work in personal journal writing. According to Vanett and Jurich, if the teacher organizes the curriculum so as to provide a framework for the use of personal topics, students will develop skills in identifying the characteristics of clear, organized, and well-developed writing, which, in turn, makes journal writing an essential bridge to formal writings.

K. W. Sandler (1987) also examined the usefulness of journal writing in French as a foreign language. She states that "the foreign-language class can profit from the use of non-graded, creative, exploratory writing exercises to free students from their fears" (p. 312), and encourages the use of ungraded and self-expressive activities

such as journal writing as a means of encouraging students to play with the language in a non-threatening situation. Her research also suggests that this type of writing will provide students with a more exciting alternative to classroom drills and conversational practice. She argues that even at an elementary level students are eager to try out their new language and need very little encouragement to experiment with their language when they are provided with non-threatening, ungraded writing opportunities.

These studies indicate that opportunities provided by journal writing are quite different from those available in the traditional structure drills, pattern exercises, or conversation practice activities typical of many of language-learning situations. The main intent of journal writing is to encourage students to try out the language they are learning in order to communicate with the teacher in an unstructured and open forum. Students need not worry about the grammatical accuracy of the language since the focus of journal writing is on communication and on enhancing understanding between students and the teacher about the progress of students' acquisition of the foreign language and written fluency.

Similar conclusions are evident in Lucas (1990) who summarizes the positive results from using journal writing. The journal writing provides: 1) a rapport between students and teachers (Peyton, 1988), 2) "cognitive demands" placed on students "to elaborate his or her own thinking" (Staton, 1988: 317), 3) the development of "a foundation of 'mutuality' or shared understanding" (Staton, 1988; 313), and 4) the development of language skills (Peyton, 1990).

### **Examination of an Effectiveness of Journal Writing in an Introductory Japanese Course**

#### **The Purpose of the Study on Journal Writing**

This paper describes the use and effectiveness of journal writing in improving the language skills of learners in an introductory Japanese-language course at the university level. Because of the introductory nature of the class, students had very limited language ability to do any kind of writing tasks at this stage. In addition, their surrounding environment was quite different from the situations facing many ESL learners. In most cases, their exposure to the target language was limited to classroom learning, although the existence of a Japanese-language partner provided a limited but useful addition to the learning environment. Although the journal writing was not part of the formalized evaluation mechanism — no grades were assigned — it was deemed to be an integral, and thus compulsory, part of the overall course.

This section is organized as follows: First, it describes the students who participated in this study — namely, their educational and cultural background, previous language-learning experience, course structure, and the introduction of the Japanese characters to the students during the course of the study. Then, it discusses the way journals were used in the course, including the frequency of writing, topics, and

teacher resource. The paper then summarizes my observations regarding the development of language skills in the course of learning Japanese, using examples of student writing. Here, I will examine the progress of both strong and less strong students as reflected in their writing. The fourth section presents representative samples of students' attitudes toward journal writing revealed in the questionnaire administered at the end of the course. I will also discuss some other contributions that journal writing made to the language learning process (such as the use of students' writing as a reading exercise material for later use), some of the problems observed during the year, as well as some possible solutions.

### **Background of the Study**

This study of journal writing involved an Introductory Japanese course taught in two academic years, 1991 to 1993. In each year, students were either full-time or part-time students at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. A majority of the students were native English- or French-speaking Canadians. There were also a number of Chinese students from Hong Kong and other countries where some dialect of Chinese was their mother tongue. In their case, they had some familiarity with the kanji characters also used in Japanese. Other first languages in the class included Hindi, Indonesian, and Swedish. Since all other subjects except language courses are provided in English at Carleton University, all students have a good command of English as either their first or second language. This particular course, on which this paper is based, is designed for students with little or no previous knowledge of the Japanese language.

The course was a two-credit, intensive language course. It met four times a week, two hours each for twenty-four weeks during an academic year. Since it was an introductory course, the material covered in the classroom instruction included both oral and written language. Generally, because students did not have much previous exposure to the Japanese language, the course had to start from a zero language base and gradually build up the language skills to enable students to express themselves in Japanese at the end of the course.

All four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) were practiced in an integrated manner to acquire Japanese because: 1) I considered it to be important to integrate all four language skills, and 2) there was a limited time to provide oral and written practice separately. Thus, journal writing was not provided as a separate unit but rather as one of the learning tools to develop students' overall language skills. Other materials used in the course included the textbook (as a source of cultural and linguistic information as well as reading material), drills and exercises for the acquisition of language structures, listening comprehension tapes, and video tapes. Numerous speaking activities were also an integral part of the course. The course was basically organized on the basis of a functional syllabus in which students were to gain implicit language knowledge through given situations. Explicit grammar explanations were provided in the textbook. I also gave additional explanations whenever necessary and provided structure drill exercises to facilitate students' mastery of linguistic structures.

Because it was essential to know the written language in order to write journals in Japanese, students were exposed to both oral and written language from the beginning of the course. In Japanese there are at least two levels of written language. The first level contains two sets of characters: each containing 46 characters; whereas the second level contains the larger and more difficult set of kanji characters originally borrowed from the Chinese language. I introduced the first character set in the second lesson. The aim of this rapid and early introduction was to help students recognize some of these characters at a very early stage of their learning. Students were not expected to memorize them all immediately, but were encouraged to study the characters gradually until they mastered them. This learning process was aided by some comprehension exercise activities in the classroom as well.

During the following three-week period, the students were introduced to writing practices so that they could start writing journals in Japanese approximately three weeks after the beginning of the course. As mentioned earlier, the classroom activities included all the language skill areas in an integrated manner. Accordingly, the students were expected to have acquired a certain ability to express what they had learned in Japanese by the end of the third week.

Since they had not yet acquired language facilities to do so in Japanese, during the first two weeks of the course, the students were allowed to write their journals in English. It was expected that this would allow students to express their reactions to their exposure to a new language and their expectations of the course. This could also enable the instructor (in this case, me) to discover what the students were learning from this type of journal writing. It provided indispensable information about their language-learning experience. I believe that what was written in these journals in the first two weeks was as valuable a source of information for me as the journals written in Japanese during the rest of the course. Surprisingly, some of the students started writing a few words or even one or two sentences in Japanese as early as the second journal entry. This was strictly a voluntary activity and it indicated to me that some students were ready to write Japanese, although in a rudimentary fashion, beginning at a very early stage of their foreign-language learning.

As an alternative, some colleagues who teach ESL at the university suggested that students could write journals in English in the first term (12 weeks) to communicate their reactions and feelings regarding learning a new language. Since the main purpose of writing journal is to provide students an opportunity to use Japanese in their own way from an early stage of learning process, I decided not to choose this option.

### **Type of Journal Writing**

For the academic year 1991–92, I introduced the journal writing only in the second term, which meant that students started writing journals after twelve weeks of classroom instruction. At first, I was astonished at the fact that some of the students could not yet form a paragraph in a coherent manner. I believed that this deficiency was related to the fact they were not used to producing meaningful passages in spite of the fact they studied grammar-focused lessons in the first term. It may have been caused by the fact that I did not provide enough opportunities for students to write

a meaningful unit until they had acquired several basic language structures. The students were not writing anything longer than a couple of sentences at any given time. As a result, I introduced journal writing at the very beginning of the course in the academic year 1992–93. To my surprise, I found that most students could write better even in the first term than some of the students in the previous year in the second term. I attribute this to the fact that they were given an opportunity to do so earlier. Therefore, I can only conclude that it is not only possible but desirable to start using journal writing even at the very beginning stage of foreign-language teaching.

The students were required to hand in one journal entry each week in a bound notebook so that the improvement in writing skills could be collected over time and seen in a sequence. Students did the writing at home at their own pace. I opted to do the journal writing activity outside of the classroom hours because of time pressures. More specifically: a) because of the limited number of classroom contact hours, I decided that classtime would best be spent on activities requiring a higher degree of student interaction, and b) because the time pressure that might be faced by the students in the classroom, I wanted them to write at home, where they could take as much time as they liked.

Each week students chose their own topic for each entry of their journal. At the beginning many were very limited in terms of vocabulary and linguistic structures. Thus, their journal writing was often a reflection of the material covered in the classroom instruction. Nevertheless, some students attempted to use the model structure to describe things related to their own lives, for example, a description of their rooms. Some students used an idea from the classroom exercises and modified it according to their needs. For example, some attempted to design puzzles with various questions generated from exercises learned in the classroom. Obviously, journal writing was different from the structure drills or grammar exercises done in the classroom, which were sometimes a compilation of isolated sentences rather than a meaningful unit.

Since students chose their own topics for their journals, they could also determine the length of each entry, the vocabulary, and the language structures. This freedom allowed them to write according to their ability. Some students progressed faster than others and could write in greater detail than others. I could also provide my comments according to the level of each student. These comments, in turn, provided an appropriate but indirect reading exercise for the students since my comments were directly related to the topic of their journal entry.

Journal writing also provided students an excellent opportunity to express their thought processes with the limited language skills they had. However, I made it a point to ask for clarification wherever I had problems understanding what students were attempting to convey through their journal entries. I provided comments for each entry in correct and appropriate language so that students could see the proper usage of the language and correct their mistakes by themselves.

In responding to their writing, I made it a point not to provide any correction to journal entries. During the course of drills and exercises in the classroom practice, I



sometimes made a general reference to the various grammatical mistakes and inappropriate use of the language that I came across in their journal writing. I continued to encourage the students to write each journal by focusing on content rather than structure. I emphasized that the main purpose of the journal writing was to assist in developing their language skills so that they could use the language to communicate with native speakers. Thus, it was better to express their ideas and opinions with some mistakes rather than not to express anything because they were afraid of making mistakes. It was necessary for me to convey to them that it may take many years to become a native-like, error-free, competent speaker or writer. This reflected my choice at the beginning regarding the decision about which is a more crucial factor in language acquisition: communicative ability or mastery of accurate language forms. I believe that it is important to encourage students to use the language they are learning to express themselves and not to worry overly about errors.

### **Some Observations on Students Writing**

As noted earlier, based on Peyton (1984), it is possible to show some evidence that journal writing contributes to students' acquisition of certain language skills when one looks at specific quantitative data. However, it is not my intention to do a statistical analysis of my current observations on students' journal writing in this paper. For the purpose of this paper, I intend to present my observations of factors such as the length of each journal entry, increased complexity of writing, increase in vocabulary, and the topic of each entry. I will also examine students' attitudes toward taking risks by manipulating structures taught in the class to meet their needs. I will examine their progress demonstrated in their journal writing, with specific examples; there was a steady increase in number of sentences appearing in each entry. Many of the students wrote just a couple to several sentences for their first journal entry describing themselves in simple Japanese. However, the quality of their writing increased gradually during the course since their vocabulary and linguistic skills were also developing gradually. At the end of that academic year, a majority of the students were producing from half a page to a full page for each entry. Thus, I may conclude that the students' writing and their language development seemed to correlate positively with the length of each journal entry.

The following excerpt (Example A) is taken from the journal of one Canadian student who wrote about herself in the first journal in Japanese and wrote about the entire class at the end of the year in her last journal entry. There are obvious changes between her first journal entry and the last journal entry in terms of: a) length of entry, b) increase in vocabulary, c) use of three different character sets, and d) use of various structures learned throughout the course. I cannot say that this is the typical change in writing development of each student in the class, because the approaches and styles were not monolithic in nature; everyone has a different approach and style in writing journals. I may safely say, however, that I saw similar changes in many other students' writing throughout the year.





to use the language in a meaningful context. It can be a reporting of one's activities on a particular day, a description of a friend, telling of a story or anything they chose. Secondly, students select the topic and write about it in ways they are comfortable with. This is probably the biggest difference between the journal writing and the traditional writing assignments in which students do not have much freedom in their writing. Additionally, in the cases described above, journals provided students with an opportunity to try out new ideas and experiment with the language on the chosen topics. They could venture to do this because they knew that journal entries would not be graded and that they did not have to worry about grammatical accuracy.

This freedom may be one reason for the diversity of the topics chosen by students for their journal writing. One student wrote very creative detective stories using all the language structures he learned and other necessary information he gathered from various sources, such as classroom practice, language-exchange practice, etc. Some others tried different ideas such as creating a puzzle, or retelling the story of a Japanese video, and all were quite successful. I have a feeling those students with an adventurous spirit enjoyed what they did and were excited about the fact that they could express many ideas in spite of their limited language ability. I could see students' progress in their journal writing from the content as it reflected their use of language throughout the course. As I mentioned earlier, their writing began with a few simple sentences and shifted toward richer and more varied content.

Throughout the course I had also expected to see similar progress in their use of language structures. Students were first introduced to new linguistic structures through exposure to the spoken language and then learned new structures through drills and conversation practices to master them. When students wrote journals using various structures they learned and practiced in the classroom I had anticipated that those linguistic features would appear in their correct forms. I did so because I assumed that the opportunity to practice would soon lead to accuracy. However, it often did not happen that way, and students continued to make the same mistakes. I made comments on students' entries with correct language hoping students would pay attention and correct mistakes on their own. Although some students were ready to notice the gap between their language use and mine and eventually corrected their mistakes, many students were not ready to do so.

Similar observation can be found in Ellis (1993) where he discusses the problem of students' learnability. He argues that the traditional "practice makes perfect" approach does not work for language acquisition unless students are ready. Students will not master accurate language structures (which will be reflected in their writing) simply because they are taught and practice those structures. Students need to be consciously aware of the specific features of the target language through their own experience of that language. In other words, students' concept about any language structures should be modified with various types of input, such as classroom learning, exposure to the native speakers. They also have to realize their need to understand and master those particular structures.

Student's writing also reflects their linguistic ability at any given stage. It also shows their ability to use language structures they have acquired. In the case of the

Japanese language, it could be the use of tense, particles, or the appropriate use of verb forms. Thus, it is important to provide teacher comments in correct forms but it is probably premature to expect students to notice those correct forms unless they are ready. It should be remembered that journal writing aims at providing students with an opportunity to write freely and adventurously rather than producing an accurate text.

In addition, I was also concerned with the effectiveness and benefits of journal writing to learners in general. Based on my observations, I can conclude without hesitation that it definitely was very effective for strong students, since they could write according to their ability from the beginning. They did not have to wait to write more complicated sentences until everyone else was ready to do so. In addition, some of the students did not restrict themselves to the material being taught or discussed during the corresponding time period in the classroom practices but sought various vocabulary items or expressions from their Japanese language partners or personal friends. They learned new words and expressions because they wanted to express their ideas. The freedom to move forward and explore new ways of expression seems to be an ideal way of learning a new language. Thus, journal writing provided a select set of students with an opportunity to explore the potential to use the language as much as they wanted. They were free to do as much writing as they wanted with as much complexity and novelty.

Example C shows some entries of one Chinese student who did exceedingly well in the course. His writing, which progressed at an amazing pace, showed that he was acquiring the language not only in the classroom but also from his outside contact with his Japanese-language partner. He used his knowledge of Chinese characters to his advantage and wrote journals on many unrelated subjects, such as Japanese economic relations with the world, his dreams for the future, etc. He demonstrated his language ability very well in journals, and because there was so much freedom in his writing, he could: 1) choose any topic he wanted, 2) venture to use many new vocabulary items, and also 3) progress writing on his own pace without being restricted to classroom teaching.

### *Example C*

I can also conclude that journal writing was useful for most of the other students because it also gave them an opportunity to show their individual language ability. I could sense that students were becoming more comfortable writing in Japanese describing their activities, friends, etc. Their journal writing may not have been necessarily perfect, but I could understand what they wanted to tell me in their own words and I believe that this is what communication is all about.

Not surprisingly, there were also some students who struggled through the course in acquiring the new language. Their language skills development was slower than the others, but there still was a steady improvement in their writing. Each entry got a little longer with one or two new expressions. One student even tried to put into Japanese a cartoon series in a couple of entries (Example D). I would not say that it was a tremendously successful attempt because I did not realize what he was doing





until he told me in English one day after the class. But he was trying out his Japanese in what he was interested in and journal writing provided him an opportunity to do that. I do not believe he would have tried that in the absence of the journal.

#### *Example D*

It seems to me that the journal writing may also be a good reflection of the students' attitude toward learning. It is clear that each student approaches a new language differently. The initial interest may wear out quickly after students realize that they have to make some effort to acquire the language so that they can use it in a meaningful way. By reviewing the journal entries each week, I discovered that students who found each new step interesting and challenging progressed at a steady pace in the language development. On the other hand, students who perceived the new material as an obstacle or a hardship found it difficult to progress. Some students used journals as an effective learning tool to practice their Japanese and made subsequent progresses during the course. Others did it because they had to and wrote similar things on each entry without making much progress.

#### **Student Feedback**

Almost all of the students indicated that they thought journal writing was a good way to use the language learned in the class. A large number of students also mentioned that journal writing was a good way to express their ideas. However, at the same time, a number of students expressed frustration over their inability to express their ideas because of the limitation of their Japanese. As these were university students majoring in various fields, they came to the class with certain knowledge in their own fields and were eager to express their ideas and opinions in the new language. It was difficult to do that in Japanese when they only spent so little time in the classroom. I tried to convince students that there was a great deal they could do even with their limited language skills. But some of them wanted to write in a sophisticated way and ended up very discouraged. Those students had to realize their limitations and cope with the fact that journal writing may not be the easiest vehicle to express complex thoughts at a very early stage of foreign language learning. This aspect of journal writing also reflected difficulties encountered by students in other language skills such as speaking and reading at this stage. The purpose of journal writing was to provide students with an opportunity to use the language they were learning at their own level, not at a native speaker's level.

I believe that the following comment by one of the students summarizes their attitudes toward journal writing for course:

Journal writing is an excellent part of the course for practicing Japanese. I think I speak for a lot of us when I say that we might get lazy and would not have improved as much had we not been forced to write a journal! It was tedious, but worthwhile.



### **Other Advantages of Journal Writing**

There were some additional advantages of using journals for the course besides the fact that it helped students to develop their language skills. I could use their writing for various classroom practice purposes as well. I actually used some of their journal entries with students' permission for: 1) reading exercise purpose, 2) drill exercise for past tense and 3) topic suggestions for other students who had difficulty finding what to write. I also used one of the previous year's student's writing about her family as a model for the other students when we were dealing with that particular subject.

I had suggested to the students that they could use their earlier journal entry to practice kanji, and some of the students told me that it was a very good exercise.

### **Some Problems with Journal Writing**

Although I believe that journal writing provided a very effective learning tool for students to learn Japanese as a foreign language, there were some problems as well. One of the problems I found was the students' tendency to write journals as if they were daily activity account diaries. It was unavoidable at the beginning since they did not have much else to say because of their limited vocabulary and the linguistic structures they had acquired. The fact that students did not have much outside exposure to the Japanese language did not make the situation any better. I discouraged the students from writing about their daily activities after a while and suggested some other topics about which they could write.

A few students asked me to assign a topic for journal writing each week because they did not know what to write otherwise. I deliberately refused to do so because I wanted them to write on the topic of their choice so that they would have something to say about that topic. However, in the future I may provide one session for students to generate their own topics so that they will have a list of topics to refer to when they cannot come up with any ideas.

## **CONCLUSION**

Many previous studies that have examined journal writing have concluded that it is a very useful tool to improve students' linguistic and cognitive skills. I hope that this paper has provided sufficient evidence from my experience with my Japanese students that journal writing may also be quite effective in foreign-language teaching at a very elementary level. As I have stated earlier, journals provide students ample opportunities to use the language they are learning in ways they want without any restrictions. This freedom of writing allows students to try out new ideas and experiment with the language on various topics they choose. It encourages students to use the language focusing on content rather than structures, and to concentrate on better communication with others.

The fact that students approached journal writing with a very positive attitude is an assuring sign that it is a useful and effective tool in their learning process. This is

evidenced by the fact that one student made the following comment about her journal when I asked all the students for their permission to use their writing for my research paper. She said: "You cannot take this from me. This is mine and I want to keep it!" If the journal is as valuable and personal to her as she said, it must have been something very meaningful and worthwhile.

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