

The Effects of Diary-writing on Writing Fluency

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INTRODUCTION

When teaching composition, we teachers of foreign languages in Japan find ourselves without the support of beneficial L1 transfer. We are faced with the daunting task of teaching first-year and even upperclass students to put their thoughts to paper in an organized fashion even though their junior high and high school educations have not prepared them for it. The fact that we must get them to do it in a foreign language compounds the difficulty of our task. Because of the dual nature of our task, many teachers attempt to develop students' writing fluency before concentrating on the more academic tasks of ordering ideas, effective argumentation, etc. Diary-writing, also known as journal-writing, is one common technique for developing writing fluency. The main purpose of this experiment was to determine to what extent diary-writing has allowed one group of students (Class E, "E" for "experimental") to achieve greater writing fluency than they demonstrated at the beginning of the course. In order to make the effect of diary-writing clearer, I compared their progress to that of a control group (Class C, "C" for "control") which was not assigned diary-writing. I have also investigated the question of whether the increase in fluency was a short- or a long-term effect.

Writing is a skill that is not developed in the Japanese junior high and high school curriculum: the average student is given only one paper a year to write, usually one annual "kansoubun" or the student's impressions of something he or she has read over the summer vacation. The only instructions given by the teacher regard the length of the paper, and so the students, without basic writing skills at hand, produce rambling, unfocused papers. Academic papers in English, however, demand logical order and presentation to be effective. Teachers of foreign languages cannot count on any positive academic writing skill transfer from the students' first language, so we are faced with two separate tasks: teaching basic language skills and teaching basic academic writing skills. We must regard the acquiring of these skills as separate but equally important goals in the classroom.

Children can't run before they walk. The ability to use a second language is just as fundamental to the writer: there can be no written communication without basic language skills. Our first goal must be to get students used to communicating in the second language so that they will not be struggling with the language itself when they are confronted with a more academic topic. They need fluency, the ability to produce language

on paper at a reasonable rate with a reasonable amount of accuracy. Once they have become reasonably adept at handling the language itself, the teacher can get them to use it more cognitively. According to many researchers, in particular Asher, language production capabilities are enhanced as stress is reduced. Diary-writing, because in its simplest form it only demands short-term recall which is unrelated to L2 ability, is just such a low-stress task. A simple list of daily activities can be the starting point—anyone can remember what he or she did the previous day with a little thought. It is also a flexible technique: to make things more challenging for students as their capabilities grow, teachers can ask them to discuss other topics within their range of experience. By keeping the ideas at a personal level, the teacher assures that any student can communicate successfully.

I have outlined the reasons behind using diary-writing as a fluency-enhancing technique. I carried out the following experiment to test whether fluency is actually improved by this technique.

EXPERIMENTAL SET-UP :

I set up the following experiment to answer three questions: (1) whether diary-writing over an extended period increases writing fluency, (2) whether it is more effective than other, more academic writing tasks at increasing writing fluency, and (3) to what degree the writing fluency achieved is a short- or a long-term effect.

I chose two second-year English department composition classes that I am teaching this year, using one as the experimental group (Class E) and the other as the control group (Class C). Initially each was given a questionnaire asking, among other things, what kind of writing they were interested in. One class expressed more interest in essay and fiction writing and slightly less interest in personal writing (letters and diaries) than the other, so I chose this class to be the control group. The class that expressed more interest in personal writing became the experimental group. Both groups were assigned a 15-minute writing exercise in which they were to describe what they had done during the previous week. They were instructed to write as much as they could during this 15-minute exercise. This same writing exercise was repeated at three-month intervals, the first one (1WE) at the beginning of their second academic year in the middle of April, the second one (2WE) in the last class before the summer vacation at the beginning of July, and the third one (3WE) at the beginning of the second semester in October. All the writing exercises were done during classroom time under similar conditions.

BACKGROUND :

Both Class C and Class E were using two texts, *Significant Scribbles* and *Grammar Three*, during their first semester. There was a focus on verb use and on both mechanical and imaginative sentence expansion. Much of the homework was assigned from the books, and both classes were assigned a short composition in the middle of the first semester. The major difference in syllabus was that Class E had to write at least 5 double-spaced

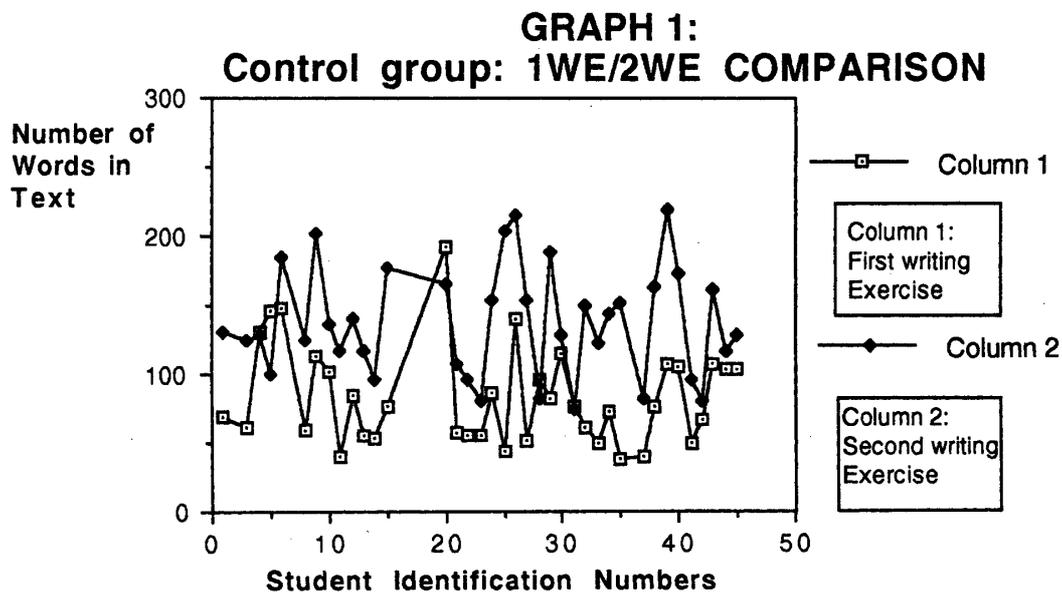
pages a week in their diaries for a period of ten weeks. They had finished their diaries by the beginning of summer and were not assigned other tasks of any significant length before the 3WE in October. Class C, on the other hand, had to write a 1000-word book report about an abridged "reader" of their choice by the end of the semester. They were required to read the book and hand in a one-page outline of their book report by the beginning of summer. At the beginning of September they handed in their rough draft, which they resubmitted in its final form by the end of September. Their writing task, as opposed to Class E's, was very focused, and the actual writing was done sometime between the 2WE and the 3WE.

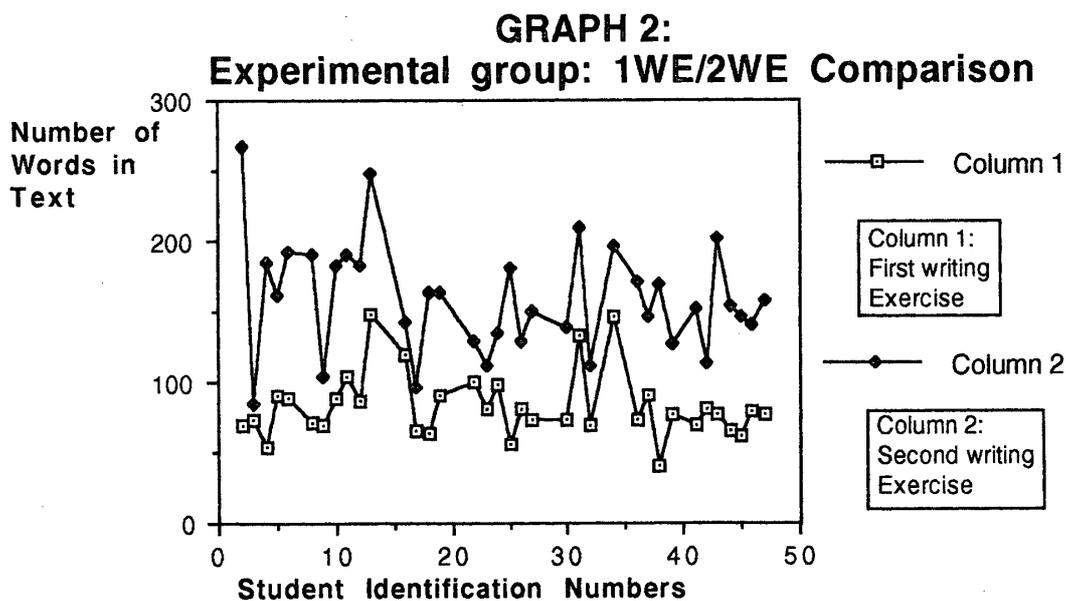
Absences from the 2WE and 3WE, due in large part to the second-year students' job-hunting, reduced the number of participants in this experiment. For the 1WE and 2WE, I was able to collect data on 36 out of 45 students for Class E, and I collected data on 38 out of 45 students in Class C. For the 3WE, I could only collect data on 29 out of 45 Class E students and 35 out of 45 Class C students.

RESULTS :

The data from the 1WE and the 2WE are compared for length of text. Because the exercise topic was similar to what Class E was writing in their diaries, there should be a marked increase in word output from the 1WE to the 2WE. Class C, because it had been required to do little extensive writing during the first semester, should demonstrate a noticeably smaller increase in word output.

As can be seen in Graph 1, 13% of the control group (5 students) showed a decrease of between 0.8% to 31% in the number of words produced on the 2WE while all the experimental group students in Graph 2 showed an across-the-board increase, the smallest three being 15%, 17%, 19%, and the rest being 29% or above. It should be noted, however, that 4 out of the 5 students showing a decrease in output in Class C had produced at





least twice the number of words as the mean for Class C on the 1WE. The mean word increase from the 1WE to the 2WE for Class C is 52.7 and the median figure is 51. For Class E the mean is 75.4 and the median is 74.

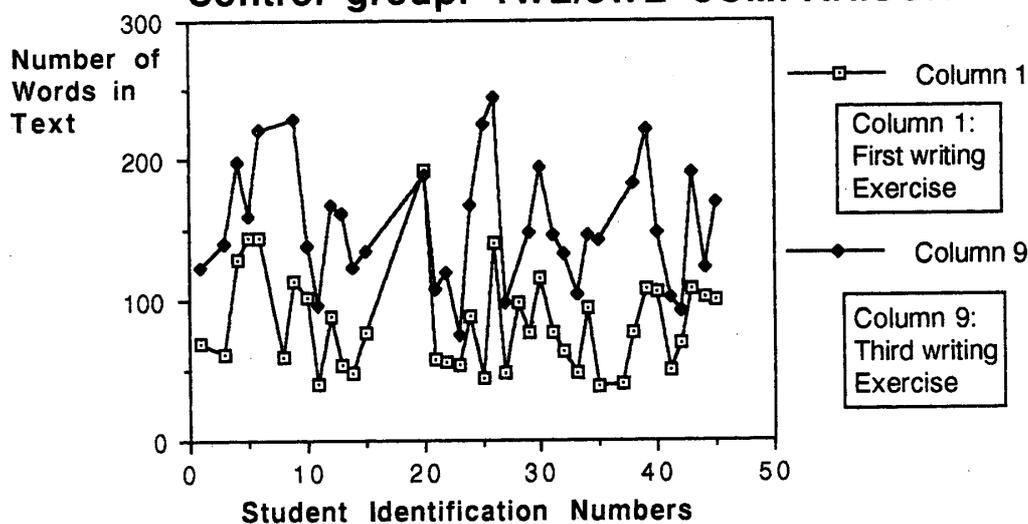
From the data in the above graphs we can see that overall both groups showed a substantial increase in output on the 2WE. What is this due to? Because both groups showed a substantial increase, this appears to reflect the effects of the composition course itself on students' ability to produce. The kind of sentence-level exercises found in the two textbooks being used in this course appear to have given the students in the control group sufficient practice for them to show a sizable increase in their text length despite the fact that they didn't write diaries.

By comparing the output of Class C and Class E, we can see that the constant, continuous writing practiced by the experimental group, Class E, has led to a greater increase in output (approximately a 90% increase for Class E compared to a 60% increase for Class C).

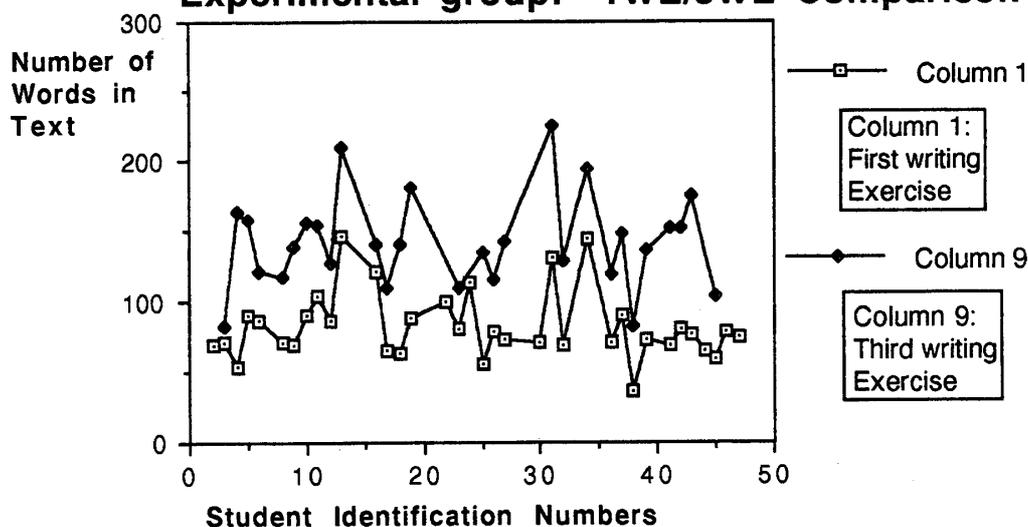
In the following graphs you will see a comparison of the results from 1WE and 3WE. If the data shows steady production by Class E, this will indicate long-term writing fluency improvement and prove the overall effectiveness of diary-writing. Because Class C had more recent writing experience, however, the greater production increase shown by Class E over Class C from the 1WE to the 2WE may no longer be evident. If this is the case, it will indicate that not only diary-writing but also more focused extensive writing tasks will yield substantial benefits for writing fluency.

As can be seen in Graph 3, all but one student in the control group (who had originally produced one of the longest texts) showed an increase in the number of words produced on the 3WE compared to the 1WE. All the students of Class E in Graph 4 showed an increase as well. The mean word increase for Class C is 68.1 and the median is 69. For Class E the mean is 59.3 and the median is 60.

**GRAPH 3:
Control group: 1WE/3WE COMPARISON**



**GRAPH 4:
Experimental group: 1WE/3WE Comparison**



The control group (Class C) shows a larger increase in production than the experimental group (Class E). The Class C data for the 3WE shows an average increase of 16-18 words over production on the 2WE. This indicates that recent writing practice has a direct effect on production. On the other hand, there is a decrease in production for Class E when we compare the 3WE results with the 2WE. This decrease, amounting to an average of 14-16 words, indicates that lack of writing practice allows writing fluency to deteriorate somewhat. In answer to the third question, diary-writing does demonstrate a positive long-term effect on students' writing fluency although this is subject to attrition.

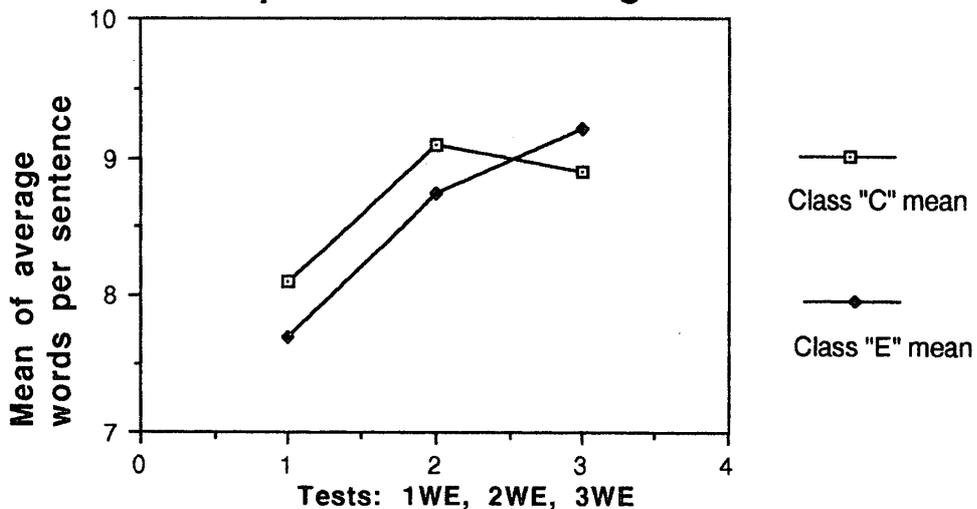
CONCLUSION :

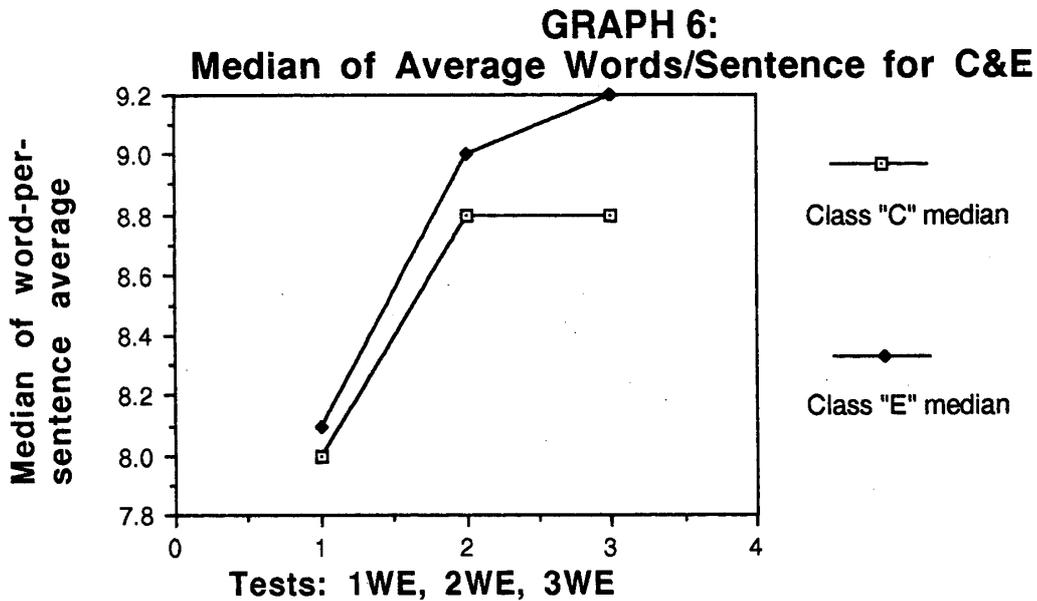
If there is a considerable increase in output between 1WE and 2WE for Class E, this indicates that diary-writing has a positive effect on writing fluency, and indeed, results show an average 90% increase in the output of Class E as a whole when we compare 2WE to 1WE. Therefore we can say that diary-writing does work to increase writing fluency in students.

If there is a substantially greater increase in output by the experimental group (Class E) than by the control group (Class C) when we compare 1WE and 2WE, we can assume that the difference in results can be attributed to diary-writing. In fact, the results show that while the control group increased the length of their papers by about 60%, the diary group showed a greater increase, by about 90%. We can conclude that diary-writing is an effective technique in increasing writing production, although as can be seen by the results of Class C other types of writing tasks can increase writing fluency considerably.

In purely quantitative terms, these increases are considerable. In qualitative terms, however, this conclusion may be criticized. What assurance is there that the quality of writing has increased or even been maintained? One sign of whether the quality of students' writing has improved or deteriorated can be found in the length of sentences they use. An average of many short sentences would indicate choppy text, simple syntactical forms and an inability to use conjunctions or clauses. Longer sentences, on the contrary, would indicate a richer, more complex syntax. In both Class E and Class C there was a slight, overall lengthening of sentences between 1WE and 2WE (See Graphs 5 & 6).

**GRAPH 5:
Mean of word-per-sentence averages over 3 tests**





Sentence length tends to be varied and unpredictable. For the 1WE, Class E's lowest average number of words-per-sentence was 5.5 and the highest was 12.4. For the 2WE, the lowest was 6.0 and the highest rose to 13.2. Finally for the 3WE, the lowest was 6.1 and the highest was 14.1. Class C's lowest average number of words-per-sentence for the 1WE was 6.5 and the highest was 14. Their lowest for the 2WE actually dropped to 6.1 while the highest rose to 16.2, and for the 3WE the lowest was 6.8 and the highest dropped to 12.0. While these figures do not indicate a substantial increase in the use of longer, and hence more grammatically difficult sentences, neither does it indicate any decline in writing quality. Other signs of quality would have to include the students' treatment of the text, such as the ability to deviate from linear listing of everyday events, smoothness of transition, lexical complexity, etc., but because this doesn't lend itself to statistical measurement I have opted to avoid consideration of these issues at this time.

Finally, by comparing the results of the 1WE, 2WE and 3WE for the experimental group, we can see how long-term the effects of diary-writing are on students. If the output on 3WE is much higher than on 1WE, this indicates that diary-writing has a long-lasting effect on students' writing fluency. The mean increase between 1WE and 2WE for Class E was 75.4 words and the mean increase between 1WE and 3WE was 59.3. Although there are some signs of deterioration, the beneficial effect of diary-writing remains evident even after a three-month hiatus.

It is obvious that diary-writing can play a role in improving students' writing fluency, although more evidence of writing quality needs to be found to bolster this largely quantitative study. There is little evidence that diary-writing is a more effective technique than other extensive writing tasks. From the point of view of motivation, however, diary-writing can be an effective writing task. Our inherent self-interest that makes us want to talk about ourselves, as well as the relative ease of this kind of writing task, make diary-writing a valuable tool for helping students to overcome the image of writing

as an onerous task. Once a writing foundation has been built, a language teacher can then go on to the more difficult task of teaching writing styles, logic and strategy. Certainly in Japan, where students come to college ill-prepared for academic writing, diary-writing can be an important first step for them.

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