

Issues in Journal Writing: Form, Function, and Student-Teacher Rapport

Ellen Kawaguchi

1. Introduction

During the magical month of December in Japan arrive seasonal greetings, year-end gifts, and — the course description form, which for some unknown reason is referred to as the *syllabus* — a misnomer by some Japanese universities and colleges. The course description formulated four months prior to the first class usually requires a statement of purpose, a general plan of delivery, a listing of texts, and miscellaneous information, such as advice to students or supplementary classroom policies. As I looked at the blank B4 sheet of paper and think back on recent successes and challenges, I wondered how I might better help next year's students develop writing skills in stand-alone courses generically entitled (English) Writing/Composition.

In addition to continuing a process-writing approach in the framework of core components designated as in-class writing practice for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and rhetorical-specific homework essays, such as expository, autobiographical, and descriptive writing, I began to consider incorporating a third component, specifically, journal writing. In order to be realistic in the demands that an additional component, rather than a supplementary activity, based on journal writing would place upon both students and instructor and to ascertain the possible contributions that might accrue to students' language arts skills, I steeped myself in the current literature on journal writing. From my reading, the themes of form, function, and student-teacher rapport constantly emerged as unifying strands, and it is to these three themes to which I now turn my attention.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theme No. 1: Form

The idea of form encompasses both the physical realization of the journal itself, the structure of the individual journal entries, and response strategies. This section will consider these dimensions of form.

Nathan (1987) has the most basic approach to journal writing, wherein first-grade students "scribbled, doodled, drew, or wrote about whatever they wished" (p. 187). The journal

entries are captured on lined paper, headed with the date, a simple caption, and the author's name and followed by an illustration.

In keeping with the concept of linguistic maturity, Sandler (1987) suggests that beginning language learners keep journals in the form of lists, categories, verb + attribute exercises, and pictures, eventually putting these rudimentary elements into structured narratives with further language study. The journals of beginning students are not graded, but those of intermediate and advanced students are evaluated for "frequency and length" (p. 316) as opposed to grammatical accuracy. Furthermore, in-class journaling allows students the opportunity to draw on the language known by them at that particular point in time, without the crutch of dictionaries or grammar books.

McCornick (1993) proposes general guidelines to university-level journal writing, which include ten journal entries per semester that reflect personally interesting student-selected topics in a noncompetitive environment. Journals have page limits; are graded for quantity but not for content; may be shared by the teacher with other students and instructors unless explicitly instructed to the contrary by the author of the journal; require a disciplined, time-management approach in the execution of the assignment; and, are likened to engaging in a dialogue with oneself. It perhaps may be inferred from these general guidelines that journaling in this instance resembles a traditional essay in format.

After briefly touching on dialogue journals, Bailey (1990) transitions to the academic journal used as a tool by future teachers, which is characterized by discipline, patience, systematicity, honesty, and thoroughness. The handwritten, word-processed, or tape-recorded journal is structured according to a flow chart which incorporates a background statement on language learning or teaching, a recording of experiences relevant to the theme of the journal, confidential and public sections, and an analysis of the entries for patterns. Confidential sections may be removed or stapled shut. Bailey states that "original diary entries often read like 'stream of consciousness' writing" (p. 220), but one wonders how to interpret this observation in light of the assertion that, in reference to famous writers, "The interior monologues or 'stream of consciousness' writing . . . turn out to be the result of laborious revision" (Deaux, 1990, p. 32).

Jarvis (1992) uses a learning record for professional development of non-native English teachers aligning them to "topic blocks" (p. 135) and copying journal entries to overhead transparencies for class discussion. In the absence of specific guidelines, students proceeded from general lists to summaries to reflective writing.

Green and Green (1993) offer a new view of dialogue journaling, usually considered to be between student and teacher. In their situation, the dialogue journal renamed the secret friend journal is carried out between classmates in different sections of the same course. With thirteen tips for implementation, Green and Green give advice on preparation, execution, and consistent management of the materials and the activity.

Casanave (1992) also supports the use of dialogue journal in an atmosphere of personalized interaction serving to deepen individual expression, where "students are communicating with a responsive 'listener' who can help them deepen their thinking" (p. 90). The idea of depth includes length of assignment, personal connections to one's own circumstances, multilevel variations on a specific topic, and author tone. Journal guidelines define the dichotomy between information and response, provide examples, and set a minimum length to encourage the positive correlation between "quantity of journal writing and quality of language thinking" (p. 93), unlike Hamada and Izawa, below, who devised word counts for surreptitious purposes. Furthermore, students receive an automatic A for compliance with length and deadline requirements.

Hamada and Izawa (1998) give a review of the literature on journal writing and then proceed to discuss the news journal according to the classification format of identification, description, analysis, and evaluation. A word count of "300 words or so on a weekly basis" (p. 102) is given, but then this word count is tempered by the fact that the length of the assignment served as a "selection scheme" (p. 102) to deter unmotivated students. Perhaps the authors could have been more modest in their initial word count or could have progressively built up to the 300-word journal entry. Deliberately discouraging students who may have had the interest and potential, but a fear of writing or, at least, a fear of writing 300 words, based on an arbitrary word count seems counter to the trend to encourage students by starting slowly and building on their current capabilities.

In addition, Hamada and Iwaza describe the news journal as "an exciting writing activity" (p. 104) where the student "summarizes an English newspaper article ... writes his/her own opinion about it" (p. 104). This conceptualization of the news journal is tantamount to writing a combination summary and reaction paper, leading one to question the pervasive attachment of the word *journal* to all types of writing when, in point of fact, such writing is better categorized otherwise. Despite their exemplary detailed procedural instructions not only for the physical layout of the pages but also for the formatting and content of each part of the so-called journal entry, the authors do not clearly show how the news journal stands apart from a reaction paper.

Harrison (1993) uses dialogue journals in the form of free journals or lesson journals depending on the purpose of the assignment. Students write a 110-word minimum and the teacher dialogues with the student by commenting and correcting one or two errors, sometimes compiling lists of common language errors for class distribution. Public recognition is a final response strategy for particularly relevant and interesting journal entries. Inspired with a sense of reaching out to the unmotivated journal writer, Harrison eschews the "implicit punishment/reward system based on 'interestingness'" (p. 73) by commenting on each and every journal. Furthermore, invoking practicality, Harrison suggests having students submit journals twice a month instead of weekly and employing a teacher's journal

to respond to the entire class, similar in concept but not scope to Casanave's (1993) sending "each class [her] own journal by electronic mail every few weeks" (p. 93).

In contrast to the overwhelming autonomous, playful, and independent approach to journal writing in the literature, Deaux (1993) suggests that "Japanese literary tradition provides excellent models for journal writing" (p. 36), specifically choosing *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon* as his model, which ironically is a text students study in junior high school for high school entrance exams, and then again in high school for university entrance exams. Deaux encourages students to "describe honestly and accurately what they see" (p. 37), in contrast to McCornick's emphasis on feelings. Furthermore, Deaux characterizes his literary model as spanning the continuum from loose and free-flowing to detailed and specific. Deaux represents a novel departure from current thinking on the use of models in journal writing, and this departure is troublesome for several reasons.

First, one wonders about the choice of text in light of the fact that it is closely connected with entrance examinations, which McCornick (1993) qualified as "examination hell" (p. 6).

Second, students are forced into a structured model, which contradicts Deaux's own point that "journal exercises, which encourage specificity and the development of an individual style, are useful" (p. 31) since there is nothing *individual* about being forced into a cookie-cutter mold. An opposing view cited in Jarvis (1992) is that "some people prefer to 'flow into a mould,' and imitate a model, rather than change their role by self-exposure and introspection" (p. 137).

Third, it might be argued that student journal writing does not often fail to produce interesting journals, as Deaux maintains, since, to take the opposing position, the student intuitively *will not* "create an individual work independent of a tradition" (p. 35). Students will rely on some tradition, whether it is the structure of a simple paragraph or letter format.

Fourth, just as Sandler (1987) refers to "artificial aids" (p. 315), such as dictionaries and texts, so too might a model fall under this rubric. Finally, however, is the decision to employ a translation rather than the original as the model when the students are native speakers of Japanese.

In his introduction to *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*, Morris (1991) refers to a "compromise between the two extremes" (p. 15) of a literal and literary translation, the probable disapproval of Sei Shonagon for "tampering with her text" (p. 16), "Translator's Despair" (p. 17), and the revealing statement that "In translating the quoted and original poems from the *Pillow Book*, I [Morris] have abandoned all attempts to be literal and have tried instead to give their general meaning and to suggest a certain poetic rhythm" (p. 16). In addition to other comments referring to the arrangement, structure, and nomenclature of the book, Morris leads the reader to believe that his translation has been greatly altered for the sake of expediency and thus cannot be trusted as the true words of Sei Shonagon.

And it is the true, individual words of the author — the development of an individual voice and an individual style — that one would assume from a reading of the literature that best characterize the purpose of journal writing for students.

In order to more clearly see the questionable use of a translated version of an original, let us examine the first excerpt of the model based on the Morris translation that Deaux distributed to his students:

One finds that a hair has got caught in the stone on which one is rubbing one's inkstick, or again that gravel is lodged in the inkstick, making a nasty, grating sound.

(Deaux, 1993, p. 36; Morris, 1991, p. 44)

The original in romanized classical Japanese reads:

Susuri ni kami noirite suraretaru. Mata sumi no naka ni ishi kishi-kishi to kishimi naritaru.

(Watanabe, 1991, p. 22)

The accompanying romanized explanatory notes in modern Japanese read:

Seibutsu de nai ga, "Maa iya-na kaminoke ne, susuri ni haitte-itari-shite" to iu kimochi. Tsugi no "ishi" mo douyou de-arau.

(Watanabe, 1991, p. 22)

In the absence of a reworked translation of the original, the point is clear that, even for the modern reader of classical Japanese, explanatory notes are necessary to get at the original meaning, much as annotations are necessary for the novice reader of Chaucer or Shakespeare. A cursory glance at the basic structure of the original Japanese, the rhyme scheme ending in *-taru*, and sound patterns emphasizing the *i* sound reveal that the original is much richer than the translation.

If a literary model is to be used based on the native language of the students, it might appear advisable to research the background of the model, as well as the associations that such a model might have for the students, prior to incorporating it as an instructional device.

The various dimensions of form are still being played out daily in classrooms throughout the world. The caring and responsive teacher has to know his or her students, their goals for taking the class in which journal writing is a component, and how to best relate student and teacher goals into journal writing for sincere, personalized communication.

2.2 Theme No. 2: Function

The function of journal writing refers to the contributions that journal writing might make to a student's language arts skills and to the personal changes that take place within

the learner over time as a result of journaling.

According to Nathan (1987), journaling permits even very young learners to use the language available to them, to spell as best as they can, to take risks with content in terms of imagination and structure, all of which teaches the child "about language, life, and ... the interactions of the two" (p. 192).

Ungraded journal writing is viewed by Sandler (1987) as "as an appetizer" (p. 313) and "as a holding tank" (p. 314) of ideas for the beginning language student, with the goal of encouraging playful and fearless experimentation as one road to creative, uninhibited expression. With further language study, the "appetizer" may be used as the basis for a longer "introspective essay" (p. 314). At higher levels, Sandler refers to the "exploratory and ordering function" (p. 318) of language, whereby the student is able to explore personally significant ideas while ordering thoughts chronologically, spatially, or in terms of importance.

These discussions of the functions of journal writing in first-language and foreign-language contexts are complemented with an overview by McCornick (1993) of English-language instruction in Japan, in general, and at Keio University Shonan Fujisawa Campus, in particular. After a brief description of Japanese entrance examinations and the general atmosphere of testing consciousness and compartmentalized knowledge, McCornick suggests that journal writing may be seen as a viable strategy that "will lead directly to the reform of language attitudes" (p. 9) on the part of instructor and student. McCornick supports Sandler's notion of a holding tank by acknowledging that students "have a body of ideas which amounts to something, which is unique and able to be expressed" (p. 10). Qualified as a "revolutionary change" (p. 11), journal writing functions in a sense to help dispel fears surrounding relevant writing and to draw disillusioned students back into a classroom that is more receptive to ideas, communication, and interaction than to rote memorization and regurgitation of grammar facts.

According to Bailey (1990), journaling by future professionals, such as teachers-in-preparation, serves an "awareness-raising function" (p. 224), helping them to define issues that may be instrumental "in generating behavioral changes and in developing self-confidence" (p. 217), which contribute to overall "personal development and insights about teaching" (p. 218).

Jarvis (1992) concurs with Bailey in that learning records provide students with opportunities to think about their teaching and to give feedback in conjunction with class work, "reframing and reconstructing personal meanings" (p. 134), resulting in change of action. Reflection serves the function of "solving problems, seeking new teaching ideas, and justifying what is already done" (p. 139).

For Green and Green (1993), secret friend journaling serves to contribute to students' fluency in "expressive language, the natural language of informal discourse among intimate peers" (p. 23). Furthermore, journaling should be seen as "an important part of a total

program directed to whatever more specialized kinds of writing students will have to do" (p. 23).

In addition to supporting the view of journal writing as a contributing factor to fluency, Casanave (1993) extends the benefits of journal writing to a more personal level, where students engage in exploration of "sensitive issues" (p. 100) and use variety in grammar, syntax, and register to communicate their thoughts. The journal is conceptualized as a vehicle for providing learning experiences to students in as individualized a manner as possible given the constraints of time and student numbers. Through journal writing, the student may undergo a personal transformation in regard to his or her views of received or experienced knowledge, with the ultimate aim of seeing "the world in new ways" (p. 88).

Harrison (1993) sees in journal writing a pragmatic solution to personalizing instruction, especially in larger classes where students might get lost in the numbers. The implicit heroism implied by Harrison's approach is that, even though the administration might permit unwieldy class sizes, Harrison puts forth the extra effort to make sure each learner in her class is heard. Journal writing functions as a way for the student to communicate with the teacher personally and as an alternative means for the teacher through comments to reach students who might not get adequate attention during class.

In addition to the functions of journal writing discussed above, Spack and Sadow (1983) cite "the continuous feedback provided in student working journals" (p. 583); emerging teacher empathy for students, who are required to "produce writing by a certain date, and to write even when . . . not inspired" (p. 589); and, the establishment of a generally positive classroom esprit de corps as positive outcomes of journal writing.

The function of journal writing seems to run the gamut from practicality to the more esoteric goals of providing opportunities for personal and professional growth, change, and development. Despite the varied functions, there is general support in the literature for incorporating journal writing into a spectrum of courses with diversified student bodies.

2.3 Theme No. 3: Student-Teacher Rapport

Student-teacher rapport for the purpose of this paper broadly refers to the personal interaction and relationship between student and teacher that might develop through written responses or face-to-face communication resulting from journaling.

In her discussion, Sandler (1987) gives the sample journal prompt "My professor is" (p. 314), with the caution that students might be more forthcoming in their comments than a teacher might expect. In this respect, the teacher has to rely on personal resources of character, such as objectivity, a sense of humor, and understanding, to deal with the unexpected.

Green and Green (1993) mention that "interesting comments" (p. 21) have been made about them in student journals — comments which are open to interpretation. The citing of an actual double-edged comment shows that they have a sense of humor about the remark.

In order to get some recent, first-hand experience in student responses to journal assignments I devised a supplementary journal writing task that read:

Prompt: Think about this class (e.g., materials, activities, people) and how this class relates to you and your life. You can write anything you want as long as you make a clear connection to this class.

Unknown to me at the time, this task was similar in some respects to the assignment proposed by Spack and Sadow (1983) in that the topic of their journal assignment was reflections on the English course itself. Unlike Spack and Sadow, however, I did not publish journal entries for classroom display and corrected sparingly as I read.

Although most students wrote things that fit within the specifications of the assignment, some responses even qualifying as glowing tributes, one and only one student consistently wrote vitriolic, nervy damnations of the class, which, in essence, were tributes to herself for her writing skill and expressive dexterity. Green and Green (1993) mention a "playful exchange of insults" (p. 22) between two males, but one might ask how a teacher is to establish positive rapport through journal writing with each individual student, let alone with the sole loner who engages in negative criticism not only about journal writing but also about other aspects of the class.

McCornick (1993) assumes that teachers have the right to share students' writing with others unless explicitly directed not to; advises that "descriptions of things will rarely be interesting; your feelings about things will almost always be" (p. 13); and, "I'm sure there is no shortage of areas where our interests meet" (p. 15). This brings into question "teacher power" (Bailey, 1990, p. 217). What would be the result if a student — especially a student in Japan — actually issued to the teacher a directive not to share the journal writing when it would appear that the teacher already had it in mind to do so? How easily could a native speaker put feelings into words when a description might better serve as a vehicle for the expression of feelings? What if there were no meaningful intersection of interests? The issues of jeopardized trust and positive rapport somehow might be more damaging, to use McCornick's own word, to the language learner than the English-language experience itself.

Hamada and Izawa engaged in an egregious abrogation of trust even before meeting one student since the hidden agenda was to use a word count as a scare tactic cum selection scheme for their news journal project. In these times when teachers should be reaching out to involve the greatest number of students in their courses and to encourage and stimulate, rather than to deter or hinder, learning and participation, Hamada and Izawa may have missed an excellent opportunity to nurture willing, though fearful, would-be writers, all for the sake of a gratuitous word count. One can only wonder if the authors operated from other misguided motives in the conduct of the project.

Casanave (1993) advocates the use of content, or subject matter, as "valuable not so much for its informational aspect as for its potential to elicit responses in the minds and hearts of students" (p. 101). Keeping in mind that Casanave is writing for the public, this leads one to wonder what kinds of responses might be sought by an unscrupulous teacher or even why a teacher with fairly scant contact with students might be impelled to delve into their hearts. What happens to the reticent student who might be viewed by a teacher as noncompliant or intractable for not being personal in his or her journal? Some teachers might retaliate. The student is put in an awkward position, especially when forced to enroll in mandatory courses to fulfill program requirements.

Moreover, the content to which Casanave refers seems more topical in nature than, say, a true content course in the humanities, social sciences, or physical sciences. For example, studying German literature in German and issues that arise from that study are more pertinent to the content course than isolated teacher-selected themes, especially those of "ethnic diversity, gender, and discrimination" (p. 92). Are content and subject matter interchangeable terms in an educational context?

Finally, it might be argued that Casanave's "system of response" (p. 93) is not really a system in the strict sense of the word but rather a set of generalized categories of comments. At the very least, a system would have a built-in hierarchy, organization, and contingency planning for issues of a more sensitive nature, on which an instructor, in his or her capacity as teacher and not counselor, would rely in case of need. More often than not, students are wont to blithely trust their teachers, but such trust has been misused by teachers. Though written with the best of intentions, Casanave's concluding statement that "Learning experiences should be real, lived, practiced, and eminently personal" (p. 101) opens itself to a variety of ambiguous interpretations and applications.

Jarvis (1992) addresses the issue of rapport in terms of not only student-teacher but also student-student. The main issue here is the fear of being laughed at by one's tutor and peers through the public display and discussion of journal entries copied to overhead transparencies. Some students found this threatening and, as a defense mechanism, refrained from engaging fully in reflective writing, limiting themselves to narratives of what transpired in the course. I cannot help but empathize with the learners in this context since I, too, would have felt uneasy about such a revelatory procedure.

Using dialogue journals with a deaf student population, Meath-Lang (1990) states that "Teachers using journals must be ever-ethical and sensitive to the fears evoked in the assignment of personal writing" (p. 8), but I suspect that the pressures of the day sometimes may undermine that sensitivity. She also addresses the issue of avoidance. First, she admonishes teachers from shirking their responsibility in the interaction engendered in dialogue journal by attending carefully to the student's entry and responding thoughtfully and at length when possible. The issue of "personal reciprocity on the part of the teacher" (p. 13) is raised,

alerting teachers to the quid pro quo of journaling with students. Implicitly discouraging the use of time-saving shortcuts to journal responses, Meath-Lang presents one of the most compelling arguments for not engaging in journal writing if the teacher cannot make a dedicated commitment to the activity:

The journal, particularly the dialogue journal, places an absolute demand of close reading on the part of the educator and disallows methodological "shortcuts." The use of journals stresses the search for meaning rather than control of the subject matter or student. (p. 8).

One might ask how Meath-Lang might respond to McCornick's blunt confession to his fictional student that he didn't "have time" (p. 13) to correct mistakes or to the methodology used by Spack and Sadow (1983), where they "read [journals] quickly, looking for meaning only, and make short, responsive, non-judgmental comments" (p. 582).

In her article, I sensed a caring, sensitive individual who was concerned about her students instead of hopping on the journaling bandwagon without due consideration to the added responsibilities that it would entail. In struggling with my own decision to incorporate journal writing, I find hers a voice of reason that confirmed what I felt.

Student-teacher rapport is one of the most troublesome issues for me in journal writing because so much seems to depend on the individual personality, not to mention, the transient mood of the instructor. My few student experiences with journal writing have been horrific since trust was betrayed: the teacher said one thing but did another. As an adult learner, prying, intrusive comments made me wary. Reliving these experiences through my reading of these articles, I perhaps have tended to read more into seemingly innocent assertions than is warranted, coming down hard on the side of caution and probity out of respect for the student's privacy and personhood.

3. Conclusion

The findings from a survey of the literature helped me redefine my position and restructure my course in order to bring about change through the incorporation of journal writing. Journal writing can be viewed as a bridge to other types of writing because it is a writing activity done for oneself as opposed to satisfying teacher demands. However, the timetable and the expectations must be realistic when enlarging on writing opportunities to include journaling. A balanced vision of reality that includes short-term opportunities with long-term goals might be a conceptual framework in which to view journal writing. In my personal experiment with journal writing with my students, changes in the quality and quantity of writing represented progress, thus supporting the idea that journal writing may offer enormous potential for educational growth, as well as play a part in accelerating writing progress.

References

- Bailey, K. M. (1990). The use of diary studies in teacher education programs. In J. C. Richards & D. Nunan (Eds.), *Second language teacher education* (pp. 215-226). Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Casanave, C. P. (1992). Educational goals in the foreign language class: The role of content-motivated journal writing. *SFC Journal of Language and Communication*, 1, 83-103.
- Deaux, G. (1993). Tradition and the student journal. In C. P. Casanave (Ed.), *Journal writing: Pedagogical perspectives* (pp. 31-47). Keio University SFC Monograph No. 3.
- Green, C., & Green, J. M. (1993). Secret friend journals. *TESOL Journal*, 2(3), 20-23.
- Hamada, M., & Izawa, H. (1998). Students' journal work. *Journal of the University of Marketing and Distribution Sciences*, 10(2), 93-116.
- Harrison, M. R. (1993). The role of teacher response in high school journal writing. In C. P. Casanave (Ed.), *Journal writing: Pedagogical perspectives* (pp. 71-77). Keio University SFC Monograph No. 3.
- Jarvis, J. (1992). Using diaries for teacher reflection on in-service courses. *ELT Journal*, 46(2), 133-143.
- McCornick, A. J. (1993). Journal writing and the damaged learner. In C. P. Casanave (Ed.), *Journal writing: Pedagogical perspectives* (pp. 6-17). Keio University SFC Monograph No. 3.
- Meath-Lang, B. (1990). The dialogue journal: Reconceiving curriculum and teaching. In J. K. Peyton (Ed.), *Students and teachers writing together: Perspectives on journal writing* (pp. 3-17). Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
- Morris, I. (Trans. & Ed.). (1991). *The pillow book of Sei Shonagon*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Nathan, R. (1987). I have a loose tooth and other unphotographable events: Tales from a first grade journal. In T. Fulwiler (Ed.), *The journal book* (pp. 187-192). Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Sandler, K. W. (1987). Letting them write when they can't even talk? Writing as discovery in the foreign language classroom. In T. Fulwiler (Ed.), *The journal book* (pp. 312-320).
- Spack, R., & Sadow, C. (1983). Student-teacher working journals in ESL freshman composition. *TESOL Quarterly*, 17(4), 575-593.
- Vanett, L., & Jurich, D. (1990). The missing link: Connecting journal writing to academic writing. In J. K. Peyton (Ed.), *Students and teachers writing together: Perspectives on journal writing* (pp. 21-33). Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
- Watanabe, M. (1991). *Makura no souchi* [The Pillow Book]. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.