

UTM Summer School: Boosting Japanese EFL Writing via Journals

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ABSTRACT

Improving students' writing proficiency is essential to ensure success in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). However, for Japanese students, especially those with low proficiency levels, they often find writing challenging due to linguistic differences and limited exposure to writing. Therefore, the Language Academy Summer School Programme incorporates journal writing as a pedagogical tool in this programme to promote English language exposure and writing practice among students. This study investigates the role of journal writing in improving students' writing skills. A total of 43 Japanese students from a private university in Japan participated in a two-week summer school programme at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) and were selected as participants for this study. Using a quasi-experimental design without a control group, students' pre- and post-test writings were analysed to investigate changes in CEFR proficiency levels and text length. The findings revealed that most of the students increased in their CEFR proficiency levels and word counts, suggesting that journal writing could be an effective tool for promoting writing fluency and proficiency among EFL students. This study suggests the integration of reflective writing practices among EFL students as an effort to improve their overall writing skills.

Keywords: journal writing, EFL learners, Japanese tertiary students, Summer School Programme, CEFR proficiency levels

INTRODUCTION

Among the four language skills, students learning a language frequently complained that writing is a hard task. This is most probably because of all the skills, writing is the most challenging one. It is no surprise that many have used this skill as a measure to determine whether someone is proficient in a language. This includes English, as stated by Kahveci and Şentürk (2021), for students to become proficient in the language, writing is certainly an important skill for them to possess. The nature of writing has also made this skill more difficult for students to acquire. Language not only consolidates language knowledge but also promotes deeper cognitive processing (Hyland, 2016). According to Ahmed (2019, p. 120), this skill is difficult because it requires "time" and "attention". This study argues attention as the "care" that students take to improve themselves such as coordination and understanding of sub-skills of writing. Among the writing sub-skills are vocabulary, coherence, dictation, grammar, and cohesion (Adam et al., 2021). The attention also involves writers giving attention towards accuracy, formality, and structure when writing (Akhtar & Riaz, 2019). For foreign students learning English, these facts will most probably affect the difficulty of their learning and mastering process. Not only is writing itself difficult but writing it in a language that is foreign to them has made the process even more difficult.

BACKGROUND

In the context of Japanese EFL students, writing in English adds further challenge because according to Aizawa et al. (2023), Japanese language has a different structure from English language. Both its syntactic and grammatical features are not like English, especially its verb



tenses and the use of articles. Not only that, but English in Japan has also been taught in highly formalized, exam-oriented settings that emphasize heavily on reading comprehension and grammar accuracy over productive skills such as speaking and writing (Yao & Slater, 2024). This has caused students' exposure to write in English to be somehow limited. The different structure of Japanese from English and the lack of writing exposure and practice cause Japanese students to struggle in expressing themselves in writing in English. All of these have contributed to a decrease in motivation among students to improve their English writing. This is supported by Vu et al. (2022), in which they claimed that motivating students to write effectively in English has been a constant problem among EFL teachers.

Short-term immersive programmes such as summer school programmes are believed to provide EFL students with better motivation to improve their English writing skills. This is because learning English under such an environment is not threatening to students because the writing they must do is mostly related to their experiences in the programme. When it comes to writing about their own experiences, students are more likely to feel more comfortable because the content that they need to write about is something they are familiar with (Langan, 2000; Sholah, 2019). With good exposure to English throughout the program as well, students are more likely to be more confident in the language, making them more enthusiastic about writing.

OBJECTIVES

Journal writing is one of the writing tools used in these kinds of programmes as they allow authentic responses from students when reflecting on their experiences. This type of writing also serves as a personal activity where students can engage with language at their own pace. With consistent practice throughout the programme, the students are believed to improve their writing. Although journal writing has been widely recognized as a beneficial pedagogical tool for language learning (Stevens & Cooper, 2023), there is limited research that specifically examines its beneficial effects on student writing in an immersive learning environment. In response to this, this study intends to investigate the development of writing skills among Japanese EFL students through journal writing during a two-week Summer School Programme. Specifically, this study seeks the answers to the following questions:

1. Does journal writing practice contribute towards CEFR Proficiency Improvements?
2. Does the length of journal entries increase in post-test writing?
3. Does the increase in the length of journal entries contribute to higher CEFR proficiency levels?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Journal Writing in EFL Contexts

Journal writing is used in English classrooms as a pedagogical tool to teach writing to EFL students. This is because many previous studies have proven its effectiveness in improving EFL students' writing (Farrah, 2012; Jannah et al., 2020; Sholah, 2019; Ngoh, 2002). Journal writing is considered a fun and engaging task for students (Sholah, 2019; White & Arndt, 1991). Many of them reported feeling happy when writing about their experiences in their journals (Ngoh,



2002). This positive experience as noted by White and Arndt (1991) and Bruning and Horn (2000), encourages students to be more motivated and interested in writing.

In this study, journal writing is defined according to the definition of reflective journal by Vuong and Le (2021, as cited in Macías & Dack, 2023, p. 4), where journal writing is seen as a type of writing that involves a structured account of facts and ideas that is heavily influenced by the writer's personal "comments, observations, experiences, and perspectives". In the EFL context, journal writing is considered a reflective and personal writing activity that incorporates facts, opinions and experiential elements when attending to specific topics related to their learning experiences. This is supported by Hamp-Lyons and Heasley (2006) and Langan (2000) where they say that journal writing can act as a tool for students to document their learning journey.

The nature of journal writing that is reflective and personal fosters both students' self-expression and critical thinking. This type of chronological writing is reminiscent of storytelling, in which it gives students the space to freely record their experiences while at the same time safely expressing their feelings and opinions about those experiences (Ngoh, 2002; Sholah, 2019). Doing so allows them to build their self-expression skills and enable them to evoke emotions (Sadry & Supramaniam, 2024), which are critical skills for students to become skilled writers. The fact that journal writing requires students to connect new information they gain from their recent experiences with existing knowledge while writing their journal (Fisher, 1996) means this process requires critical thinking skills to be integrated into their learning (Farrah, 2012). This process is also making the learning to be more meaningful for students, resulting in a lasting impact on their learning (Kerka, 1996; Rachmawati et al., 2023; Fisher, 1996).

Based on the discussion, it can be said that journal writing can promote active learning among EFL students. This writing gives students autonomy in their learning, where they have to decide what to include in their writing (Chang, 2019; Macías & Dack, 2023) which strongly aligns with future students' requirement of independent learning (Saad et al., 2023). This encourages active engagement with critical thinking in a process of self-expressing themselves in writing. This is supported by Rachmawati et al. (2023) and Boud (2001), in which they claimed that the process of thinking critically and reflectively fosters students to develop not just their intellectual skills but also their writing proficiency.

Journal Writing as a Tool to Improve Writing Fluency and Proficiency

Writing fluency is the ability of a writer to write a relatively large amount of text within a given time period. This implies that the more words a student writes, the longer their text and the higher their writing fluency (Sholah, 2019). Journal writing has been recognized as an effective tool for promoting writing fluency among EFL learners for two main reasons. First, when students write about their personal experiences, they feel more comfortable at expressing their ideas and emotions (Argudo, 2021). This is because the content of the writing is about them, so they are very familiar with the content, making them have no problem writing about it. The students also felt safe to express their opinions on the topic as they reflected on their own personal experiences. Second, when writing a journal, students are not pressured to produce grammatically perfect sentences because they are more concerned with communicating to the readers about their experiences. This situation has helped students to be able to write more



(Bruning & Horn, 2000) because they are not worried about the accuracy of their writing, promoting writing fluency (Baresh, 2022; White & Arndt, 1991).

The literature informs that most EFL students give positive feedback about journal writing where they say that it helps increase their confidence and motivation in English writing (Dincel & Savur, 2019; Farrah, 2012; Jannah et al., 2020; Macías & Dack, 2023; Ngoh, 2002). When students are confident and motivated in expressing their ideas and thoughts in their journals, they are more likely to develop fluency of expression (Sholah, 2019) which will result in writing fluency.

As noted by Hyland (2016), a high volume of writing can mean the students have both writing fluency and proficiency or just writing fluency. This is because students who write more do not necessarily produce better quality writing. They may have more words, meaning they have the writing fluency, but their language use may not be effective, such as writing with less accuracy, organization and coherence, causing them to have low writing proficiency (Zenker & Kyle, 2021). Therefore, in contrast to writing fluency, writing proficiency is the use of “language in the best and most efficient manner possible” by the writers (Özçelik & Batur, 2023, p. 157). The researchers argue that journal writing can serve as a bridge between fluency and proficiency. This is because, as suggested by Langan (2000), regular journal writing can foster the habit of expressing ideas which in the long run will not only benefit fluency but also proficiency in students’ writings. This is supported by Macías and Dack (2023), where they say that regular journal writing can develop students’ knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, thereby increasing fluency and proficiency.

In short, writing more does promote fluency, but if the writing lacks complexity, accuracy, or syntactic development, it may not always lead to language development or writing skills (Fleckenstein et al., 2020; Zenker & Kyle, 2021; Barrot & Agdeppa, 2021). However, with regular journal writing practice, students are more likely to improve their grammar, vocabulary, and content organization, indicating a higher chance for them to improve fluency and proficiency in writing.

METHODOLOGY

The students of this study were 43 Japanese EFL students from the February-March cohort who attended a two-week Summer School Programme at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. These students were from a private university in Japan, and most of them are engineering major students. These students joined the programme with CEFR proficiency levels ranging from A2 to B1. Throughout the programme, each Japanese student was paired with one Malaysian UTM student who is known as a Malaysian buddy. The Malaysian buddy is in charge of providing the students with necessary English language support while helping them to adapt to the local culture. As what Che and Ngui (2024) suggested, the social interaction between the students can indirectly contribute towards their language learning, which is what the buddy system in this programme offers.

The two-week summer school programme required students to write eight journal entries in which students were given about 30 minutes to complete each journal entry with minimal



scaffolding from their Malaysian Buddies. These journal writings were recorded in an activity book, which they had to submit to their instructor at the end of the programme, to ensure that the students' writing was entirely theirs and not assisted by any artificial intelligence tools. This measure is believed to allow students to organically develop their writing skills and when their writing development is measured, the findings inform their true ability or development.

This study used a quasi-experimental design with a pretest and post-test design. However, unlike Pham and Tran (2021), this study did not include a control group. The same group of students' writing skills were assessed during the two weeks they participated in the summer school program. They were measured using journal entries as a comparison tool for pre- and post-tests. The intervention that students received before the post-test was regular journal writing practices.

This study collected two journal entries of students, the first and the final entries. The first journal was treated as the pre-test writing, while the final journal served as the post-test writing. These journals were selected for analysis for two key reasons: (1) the topic of the journal was the same, "My Malaysian Buddy," and (2) the final journal is a valid measure of students' language development (if any) as it is the last writing product produced by students at the end of the programme.

All collected journals were manually retyped as they were written (verbatim) in Microsoft Word and properly coded. Each journal entry was assigned a code, such as "P1PreT" for Participant 1's Pre-test Writing. The journals were then copied and pasted, one by one, into GSE Text Analyzer, a reliable tool used to analyze students' CEFR levels since it measures vocabulary range, grammar, and sentence complexity based on the CEFR framework (Santucci et al., 2020). The Text Analyzer was used in this study to identify:

1. The CEFR levels of students for both pre- and post-test writings
2. The word count for each journal

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the GSE Text Analyzer were quantitatively analyzed in two phases, descriptive analysis and inferential analysis. According to Spriestersbach et al. (2009), descriptive analysis is a prerequisite for inferential analysis in a way that it becomes the foundation for drawing inferences. Kaur et al. (2018) described descriptive analysis as a summary of raw data from a set of population while inferential analysis makes conclusions based on that data.

The first phase of analysis involved descriptive analysis. This analysis consists of two sub-analyses, where the researchers looked at the changes in students' CEFR levels as well as their text length. Prior to the analysis, students' pre- and post-test writings were assigned CEFR levels. These data were collected and recorded manually in a table. This analysis was done to see if there was an improvement, no change at all or deterioration in their overall writing skills or performance over the two-week period of the programme. After that, the researchers measured text length by recording the total word count for both pre- and post- test writings. This analysis

was conducted to determine whether there was a difference in word count between each student's first (pre-test) and final (post-test) journal entries.

In the second phase, the inferential analysis, students who showed improvement in their CEFR levels in the post-test writings, along with their corresponding text length records, were identified and extracted. This was done to clearly show whether an increase in CEFR level was accompanied by an improvement in the length of students' texts. This analysis was performed to assess whether there was a statistically significant relationship between the increase in word count and the changes in students' CEFR levels

Ethical Considerations

All students participating in this study were properly briefed on the study's purpose and their roles as participants. All their responses were promised to be reported anonymously, and they were informed that they had the right to withdraw their participation at any time. Once everything was cleared, they signed a consent form indicating their agreement to participate in the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What changes in CEFR proficiency levels can be observed between the first and final journal entries of the Japanese EFL students?

The findings reveal that there are significant changes in CEFR proficiency levels observed between the pre- and the post-test writings of students. The following figure, Figure 1 summarizes the data:

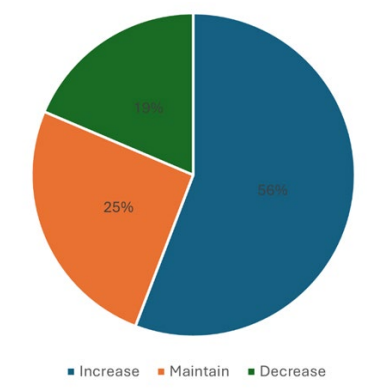


Figure 1. Comparison of CEFR Level from Pre and Post Test Writings

Figure 1 illustrates that the majority of the students, 24 out of 43 students (56%), recorded an increase in their CEFR levels, followed by 11 (25%) of them showing no changes in their levels, while only eight (19%) showed a decrease in their levels.

Variation in Students' Text Length

The look into the length of students' texts in both pre- and post-test writings has resulted in variation in their word count readings. The findings of the study show that the majority of students successfully produced longer texts in their post-test writing. These findings are summarized in Figure 2:

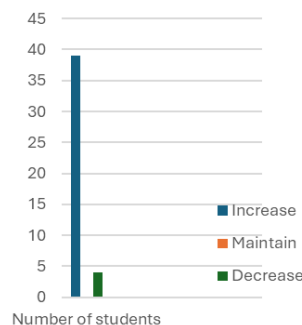


Figure 2. Comparison of Word Count from Pre and Post Test Writings

Figure 2 reveals 91% of the students were with longer writings in their post test while only a small number of them (9%) produced shorter texts in their post-tests. This finding has illustrated that students, at the end of the programme, expressed themselves more in words than at the beginning of the programme.

Relationship Between Text Length and CEFR Proficiency Levels

The investigation into whether the length of journal entries contributes to higher levels of CEFR proficiency has shown that students with increased CEFR levels mostly had higher word counts, meaning longer texts in their post-test writing. The summary of the data is displayed in the following figure, Figure 3:

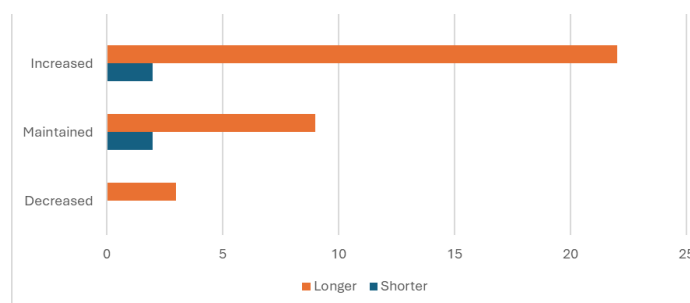


Figure 3. Relationship Between Text Length and CEFR Proficiency Levels

As seen in Figure 3, 22 students (51%) who experienced an increase in their CEFR levels also produced longer journal entries by the end of the programme. Only two students who improved their CEFR level wrote fewer words in their final entries. As for students who maintained their CEFR levels, a significant portion of them, which is 9 out of 11 students, produced longer



journal entries in their post-test writings. Another two of them were found to write shorter texts. The students with decreased CEFR levels produced longer texts in their post-test writings. In general, students with longer texts did not necessarily achieve higher CEFR proficiency levels in their post-test writing.

Discussion

The findings of this study have prompted the discussion to be organized into three main themes: (1) the influence of journal writing on CEFR proficiency improvements, (2) the role of text length in writing fluency, and (3) the impact of text length on students' CEFR proficiency improvements. Each theme is discussed in detail in the following subsections:

The Influence of Journal Writing on CEFR Proficiency Improvements

The present study reveals that more than half the students in this study improved their CEFR proficiency levels after writing journals regularly for two weeks. This finding is supported by a recent study done by Macías and Dack (2023). The study reports that after four weeks of journal writing intervention, 25 EFL sophomore students' proficiency in writing had improved, and they scored better in their post-test writings. This has proven that students' proficiency in writing in a foreign language is likely to increase after participating in journal writing exercises for a period of time.

A quarter of the students were found to have experienced no change in their CEFR levels in their post-test writings. This finding is significant as it may imply that no learning took place; however, since the duration of the programme is short, two weeks, no change in students' proficiency levels is considered relevant. This is because some students take longer time than their peers to consolidate new knowledge before further progress is made. It is therefore, not fair to say that the students who experienced no change in their CEFR levels as students who have reached a plateau (a common phenomenon in SLA where students experience a temporary halt in visible progress) in their learning (Žammit, 2021). Some students, even if they remained at the same CEFR level, managed to score higher in their post-test writings. Hence, the no change in students' proficiency levels does not necessarily indicate no improvements in students' writing ability. A comparison of actual scores and not just a comparison of CEFR levels also needs to be done to better assess the changes in progress that have occurred in their post-test writings.

Less than 20% of students recorded a decrease in their CEFR levels. Despite this group of students being the minority, the number is still significant. The researchers believe that this decrease might be due to the limited time given to students, which was only thirty minutes per journal entry, which might have pressured them into producing a rushed written product. When writing is done in a rush, students may not be able to showcase their true ability in writing. This, as reported by Silva et al. (2024), can also call for writing fatigue as they are required to finish their writings in 30 minutes or less.

In general, this study has demonstrated the great potential that journal writing has on students' writing proficiency if used regularly, even in a short-term context. However, the limitation in



terms of the limited time given to the students to complete their journal writing needs to be adjusted so that it does not affect students ability to perform at their best.

The Influence of Text Length on Writing Fluency

More than 90 percent of students were found to produce longer texts in their post-test writings. This illustrates increased writing confidence in students' written production after regular journal writings within the span of two weeks. The longer the texts, the more the number of words that the students produced. According to Sholah (2019), the higher the number of words produced, the higher their writing fluency. This means that longer texts written by students suggest an increase in writing fluency as the texts contain more words. Sholah (2019) described writing fluency as the number of words produced by EFL students over a period of time. Hwang (2010), on the other hand, measured writing fluency by tracking the words produced by students per minute. This study uses Sholah's method to measure students' writing fluency, where it focuses on words produced within a set timeframe and not per minute.

Hwang's (2010) study has shown that when students were more confident in their writing, they were found to be able to improve their writing fluency. Hwang used an 8-week collection of guided freewriting samples of eight EFL tertiary students and not journal writings, but this study believes that journal writing is also a form of guided freewriting as students were given topics to write but no word limit was given to them. Therefore, it is fair to say that EFL students, when put in a practice of writing regularly on focused or guided topics, their confidence in writing the foreign language improves tremendously. This is because, as stated by Listyani (2021), EFL students with better self-confidence would be more comfortable with their language ability, which leads them to feel more motivated to write. This increase in motivation is what is believed to drive the majority of students in this study to write longer texts in their post-test writings.

In addition, when the students are more comfortable with the language and their ability to write in a foreign language, they also feel more comfortable expressing their ideas more, which calls for them to write longer texts. They do not think too much about making grammatical mistakes, choosing a variety of vocabulary, or writing longer sentences. They care more about expressing themselves as much as they can within the given timeframe. This supports Skehan's (1996) definition of fluency as the capacity of students to generate language in real time without hesitation or interruption. This means that students are able to produce language more quickly because they are more focused on delivering their messages to their readers, resulting in them producing longer texts. To add to this, the nature of the journal writing they are writing as well fosters students to write more because, as emphasized by Sholah (2019), writing something familiar to one's life can help the writer to have a continuous source of ideas. Thus, no surprise when students managed to expand on their thoughts better in the post-test writings as they wrote about their own experiences throughout the programme and day by day the programme gets more and more familiar to them. This is what has eased the writing process and results in students producing more words.



The Impact of Text Length on Students' CEFR Proficiency Improvements

According to the findings, students' post-test writing results did not always show higher CEFR levels even though they wrote longer texts in their post-test. However, the majority of them (51%) showed an improvement in their CEFR levels after producing longer journal entries at the end of the program. This illustrates that there is a greater chance for students to achieve a higher CEFR level in their writing when they produce longer texts. This is explained by Hyland (2016), who states that the volume of writing not only contributes to students' language fluency but also their language development. This means that students' ability to write more at the end of the program is a sign that they have improved in their language.

The fact that a large number of students (49%) either maintained or decreased their CEFR level in the post-test even though most of them wrote longer texts has challenged the notion that writing more equals quality writing and calls for a higher proficiency gain. This is because, as emphasised by Fleckenstein et al. (2020), Zenker and Kyle (2021), and Barrot and Agdeppa (2021), writing more does promote fluency, but if the writing lacks complexity, accuracy, or syntactic development, it may not always lead to language development. The nature of writing journal entries may have provided students with opportunities to use and reinforce new vocabulary and improve their grammatical structures, which may have contributed to their improved CEFR levels. However, since writing is inherently a complex process and a demanding task, some people need longer time than others to show improvements or even for them to consolidate new knowledge before further progress can be achieved. The findings of this study have shown that writing at length may have helped these students strengthen their existing writing skills, leading to more fluent writing, rather than pushing them towards achieving higher levels of proficiency. Improvement in language proficiency goes beyond word count. It involves the quality and clarity of writing, as well as the ability to use complex language structures effectively.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study investigated the development of Japanese EFL students' writing skills after writing journal entries regularly for approximately two weeks while participating in the Summer School Program. The study findings demonstrate that the majority of the students managed to get higher CEFR levels and were able to write longer texts in their post-test writing. When looking at whether the length of journal entries had an impact on students' CEFR levels, the study found that just over half of students recorded better CEFR levels with longer texts while another large number of them either maintained or decreased in their CEFR levels. The study then concluded that producing longer texts only indicates a student's writing fluency but not necessarily writing proficiency. Writing proficiency considers clarity of ideas, sentence structure, grammar and more. This study provides implications into the effective role of journal writing even for a short period of time in improving students' writing fluency and also proficiency. However, there is a need for instructors to provide a balanced approach to journal writing that prioritizes fluency as well as the quality of content and language use. Future studies may want to consider extending the journal writing period to a longer period to confirm whether journal writing can promote writing development beyond fluency and also integrate feedback from instructors into each journal writing product to maximize student writing development.



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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

This manuscript was developed with the assistance of DeepSeek AI for the purpose of reviewing sentence clarity and help on the brainstorming process. The tool/service supported the author(s) in reviewing and refining the content, and the authors assume full responsibility for the final version submitted for publication

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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Authors' Contributions

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: study conception and design: Abid Zulfadhli Razali, Nurhidayah Mohd Sharif; data collection: Nur Syazwani Mohd Zolkifli; analysis and interpretation of results: Abid Zulfadhli Razali, Nurhidayah Mohd Sharif, Faraha Hamidi; draft manuscript preparation: Abid Zulfadhli Razali, Nurhidayah Mohd Sharif, 'Atiqah Shahrudin, Nur 'Ain Mohd Shahroom. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.