

# Diary Assignments

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When considering ways of evaluating college students, one normally thinks of end-of-semester exams or essays. Weekly mini tests, class presentations or interview tests are also possibilities. Another option available to EFL teachers is to assign a diary. In what follows, I plan to look at the merits and demerits of such assignments, error correction, appropriate feedback from teachers and the advisability of the use of dictionaries and grammar books when writing diaries. I will also talk about the nuts and bolts of setting up a diary assignment.

To start with, a personal anecdote. Upon arriving in Japan, the first college-level classes which I taught, on a part-time basis, were at a Christian junior college for women in Saitama. One of the classes which I was assigned to teach was a writing class and I set the students to write diaries each week as homework. One quiet girl who sat towards the front of the class frequently had a far-away look in her eyes during the class and I came to the conclusion that she was a rather dull kind of student. On reading her diary I was greatly surprised to find that not only was she taking this assignment seriously but was also both interesting and perceptive in what she had to say. It is of course hardly news that 'one should not judge a book by its cover', although I think we all need to be mindful of not committing this error. Other lessons I felt that could be drawn from this episode were (a) the fact that this student had a glazed look in the class could very well be because my class was uninteresting and / or difficult to understand and (b) a student may prefer to express herself in written form to speaking

in front of her peers whose (oral) English ability may or may not be better than hers.

When I assign a diary, I typically give students some guidelines about how to go about the task. First of all I ask them to buy a standard B5 notebook. Although loose-leaf paper is a more flexible format and certainly a lot lighter for the teacher to carry, the student can easily misplace it and it doesn't have the feel of permanence which a diary should. For this reason, I think that if a diary is written on loose-leaf paper, students are less likely to treasure it, attach memorabilia – photos, concert tickets, pamphlets etc. and also perhaps less likely to take as much care over the writing as they would if they thought it would be preserved. I request students to try and write a fixed number of words per line e.g. 8 ~ 10 and also to write on a set number of lines per page e.g. 15. In this way, without asking students to keep an exact word count, I am able to see quite easily how much each of them is writing. This instruction also discourages lazier students from trying to make three or four words fill up a whole line in order to give the impression that they have written more than they actually have. I also get the students to write on every other line in order that I can (a) correct their English (b) respond to any question they might ask. I tell the students that if they set aside some time to write a diary every day or every other day, they will be able to observe their improvement in writing speed i.e. they will be able to see that during the first week of writing they are only able to write a limited amount within, say, ten minutes, but that after a month or so has elapsed they are able to write considerably more within the same time frame. This improvement and concomitant sense of achievement will be less marked for those who write their diary at one sitting e.g. the night before the next class. I also mention to the students that another advantage accruing to those who write daily or every other day is

that if they persevere, the diary writing will become a habit, a part of their daily routine, and will become easier to do as time goes by. I give them the analogy of starting a diet or exercise regimen – to begin with it is tough but it gradually gets easier. Rather than assigning diaries as homework, it is, of course, also possible to set aside some class time each week for diary writing e.g. the final ten minutes. In this case, the teacher will be able to give immediate assistance, if needed. Also, if a student wishes to make some comment on the class itself, her memory of it will be very clear.

More important than the foregoing is instructions concerning the content of the diary. I announce to the students that they may choose any topic they like to write about and emphasize that, since the most important aspect of the diary is the communication of information, they should not worry themselves overly about grammar, spelling etc. I also mention that as most peoples' lives are fairly proscribed, although it is useful to record a typical day once, there is not much value in recording the performance of the same actions day-in and day-out. Of course it is a different matter if, on one day, the student gives a general description of a typical day and then on subsequent occasions she focuses on a part of that day and gives a detailed description of, say, all the actions which she performs from getting up to leaving the house in the morning or of one of the lectures which she attended etc. Although I leave the choice of topic entirely up to students, to help those having difficulty coming up with a good theme, I supply a list of possible subjects. I stress that they should confine themselves to writing sentences which they themselves have composed and assure them that it is very easy for a native-speaker to know whether students have written the sentences themselves or simply copied them from an English language source. Sometimes if the student is a returnee with a good English ability and she is writing quite simple sentences on simple topics, I might

encourage her to attempt to use more complicated grammatical constructions or to discuss more complicated topics such as her major or a topic in current affairs which interests her, or to analyze or critique something, or to debate the pros and cons of an argument.

As far as recourse to dictionaries / grammar books is concerned, I suppose there are both reasons to encourage and discourage use of these resources. Obviously if writing fluency is the paramount goal, then it is better for students to use such reference books as sparingly as possible. My own prejudice, however, is to encourage students to refer to such sources. I base this on my own experience of trying to learn Japanese. I should say, though, that as someone who has spent many years living in Japan and many hours trying to learn Japanese and whose Japanese ability is still lousy, my language learning insights and strategies might justifiably be thought dubious, at best. However, for what they are worth, my own thoughts are that (a) dictionaries and grammar books are wonderful language-learning resources (b) the quality of English / Japanese and Japanese / English dictionaries are of a very high standard containing very informative example sentences showing usage (c) in my experience, it is precisely at the time that one is about to commit oneself to paper in a foreign language, whether composing or translating something, that one might wish to check one's knowledge or discover a grammatical point or word or spelling which one didn't know. For instance, when I write something in Japanese, an expression might come to mind which I have learnt for an exam but which I never get to use in conversation but I might be unsure of the verb form or particle which the expression takes. By looking it up, I am able to activate and reinforce the correct expression in my mind. Of course, unless I have been able to find an example sentence in the dictionary which matches my intended use or unless I have changed my intended

meaning to match an example in the dictionary, it is possible that my use of the expression will still be wrong even after checking the verb form or particle. However at least I will have eliminated those mistakes which a non-native speaker is easily able to identify.

Error correction is a topic which I cannot hope to do justice to in the space available. I think, though, it is fair to say that the issue of whether to correct errors or not, is a thorny one. At first sight, the fact that Japanese faculty members, the university administration, students' parents as well as, most importantly of all, the students themselves expect mistakes to be corrected might make the matter of 'to correct or not' seem entirely uncontroversial. This is not to mention the teachers' own sense of responsibility to their students which would also seem to dictate that correction be performed. However the review by Leki (1990) of some of the literature on the effects of error correction on L2 students' writing (Semke 1984; Zamel 1985; Robb, Ross and Shortreed 1986; Fathman and Whalley 1990) reveals little evidence to support the claim that such correction helps them to write better. Some students may not attempt to read the corrections while others may have difficulty understanding what has been written. Other students may not understand the grammar rule on which the correction is based and hence will be unable to prevent themselves from making the same mistake in the future. Apart from this, if the teacher corrected all the errors, it would sometimes require an almost complete rewrite which is not only extremely time-consuming for the teacher, but also disheartening for the students when they receive their work back full of red marks and unrecognizable as their original piece of writing. In such cases, some students may feel inhibited from expressing themselves in the diary on future occasions. Also, given that the purpose of writing is to communicate a message, it can be argued that as long as the message is communicated,

the correctness of the grammar, spelling, style etc. should be considered of secondary importance. Taking into account both arguments for and against error correction, my own personal, albeit flawed, solution is to do a certain amount of correction in addition to writing a comment about the content and giving some words of encouragement. Given that one wishes to do correction on a selective basis one may, for instance confine oneself to (a) certain types of grammatical errors and / or (b) errors which make it difficult to understand the meaning e.g. word order. Even this selective correction and writing of comments can be quite time-consuming so if one has a large class, it might be a good idea to only take in a certain number of diaries each week.

At the time of setting the diary as well as at various times during the semester, I tell students that, if they are serious about improving their English ability, after I return their corrected diaries, they should look at their mistakes, identify their weak points, consult a grammar book, preferably one with exercises, and try to learn from their mistakes. When several students make the same kind of mistakes, it is a good opportunity to do some remedial work with the whole class – examples on the blackboard, exercises, drilling etc. I tell students that if they have difficulty expressing their idea in English, they should write it down in Japanese before they forget what they wanted to say and then even if I am unable to grasp their meaning and write a corrected version by myself, I will be able to ask a Japanese member of the English Group for assistance. The same applies in cases where they have written something in English but are unsure if it reflects what they wanted to say. Again I tell them that if they write the Japanese version as well, I will be able to help them. In order to keep students motivated and encourage them to learn from their mistakes, I remind them of the severity of the job market for university graduates who don't

have qualifications which can be harnessed in the workplace and tell them that if they are able to score well on the TOEIC they will stand a better chance to find a job. I remind them that in order to get a good TOEIC score, apart from listening ability and grammar, they will also need to improve their reading comprehension skills and increase their vocabulary. I stress to students that by reading as widely as possible in English they will be able not only to improve their reading skill and vocabulary but also to become better writers.

There seem to be a number of positive features of diary assignments both from the point of view of students and of teachers. First of all, the writing of a diary is likely to appeal to some students because it provides them with opportunities to (a) express intimate or confidential things which they might not otherwise wish to communicate (needless to say it is vital that teachers fully respect their students' confidences) (b) engage in self-reflection (c) express their emotions (d) use and re-use vocabulary and grammar patterns (Without such opportunities or regular reviews, newly-learnt words, phrases or grammar will not stick in the memory.) (e) discuss that most important person, herself. (Whilst the latter is the most obvious topic for the diary, the student not wishing to talk about herself may select any topic whatsoever. This flexibility of the assignment is, I think, a very positive feature.) (f) do (a) ~ (e) in an environment which is more private and less threatening than, for example, a typical communication-centred class.

From the teachers' point of view, diaries may (a) provide a window into the students' world and allow the teacher to see dimensions of the students which are not normally seen in spite of the fact that students have opportunities to talk about themselves in conversation classes (b) allow the teacher to have an individual dialogue with each student, which otherwise might be

difficult in a large class (c) provide quick, valuable feedback about the shortcomings of lessons instead of the teacher having to wait for comments on end-of-semester class questionnaires when, in any case, students would be unlikely to have good recall of specific lessons and even if they did, would not wish to write about every lesson (In this case, instead of the course being either completely finished or half-finished before the teacher receives feedback, she will, if necessary, be able to immediately take remedial action, revising teaching methods, materials etc. or at least fine-tuning the class.) (d) make it easier for the teacher to come up with a fairer assessment of the student rather than relying too heavily on how actively the student appears to be participating in communicative activities in the classroom, which can lead to assessing the person on the basis of their personality. (This, recall, is one of the points that I was making in my anecdote at the beginning.)

Unsurprisingly there are also arguments against diary assignments. Possible objections might be: (1) lazy students aside, the diary format is unlikely to be universally appealing (2) the teacher's out-of-class work, reading, responding to and correcting the diaries can be quite substantial, depending on the size of the class (es) and how many classes are being assigned to write a diary (3) time for English study is necessarily limited and perhaps the time spent writing a diary could be more fruitfully spent on something which has more immediate benefit to the student in future, say, TOEIC study, or a different kind of writing assignment e.g. business letters.

In conclusion, then, notwithstanding the fact that diaries seem to have a number of shortcomings, there appear to be sufficient positive features to recommend them to certain students.



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