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Using Still Images for Written English Communication

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David John WOOD

1. Educational Circumstances

A decade ago the Japanese educational ministry declared that Japanese high school students should be taught enough English at school to be able to communicate in English. This initiative has had scant effect as most Japanese high schoolers cannot express themselves in English. In 2013, the government pledged major test funding to address the problem. However, demanding that students achieve good communicative levels in speaking and writing English by compelling them to take TOEFL computer based tests won't guarantee success as testing alone at a level beyond most students' abilities may only fuel futility and expose more problems, risking serious negative resistance to English language learning in an educational system short on effective methodology and qualified, capable English teachers. Increasing staffing is beyond most researchers' authority, but improving the way we teach is our professional responsibility.

2. Overall Aim

This researcher's overall aim is to explore an innovative approach to teaching Japanese students' more effective English communication through the use of one of their own resources, the photos that they accumulate from an early age. Their photo banks are extensive as a result of the smart phone revolution with continually improving camera functions and memory capacity. All students take pictures or have them taken by others. While textbooks have the advantage of being a physical resource that students can refer to, published study materials have irreconcilable disadvantages not conducive with communication. The contents may neither represent the majority of English interaction, nor relate to students' actual needs or the communicative framework that they most require. The stereotyped subject matter rarely captures interest or helps students learn.

3. Class Composition

Given a class of 30, the real forum of productive communicative interaction is among these individuals themselves via their unique linguistic identities. Impersonally controlling students via an externally imposed textbook cannot support real-world fluency, complexity or accuracy. In the super highway information age, class members can better select from all the countless sources of

English those that they believe will best stimulate their acquisition. Sharing their materials in class facilitates the achievement of the linguistic and paralinguistic skills that they most need to communicate in both writing and conversation.

4. Research Background

The so-called "Dogme" approach (see Thornbury, S. "A Dogma for EFL". *IATEFL Issues*, 153, page 2, 2000) which has been trending globally since last decade (although an approach long employed by the current writer without the popular title) along with the impact of the cyber revolution on teaching materials and methods have brought traditional textbook teaching into question. In the most connected era ever, the global nature of teaching EFL has meant that new and alternative methodologies are increasingly vying for attention. Amongst them, using student photos as a unique alternative to textbooks and as a dynamic stimulus for communication has long been apparent to this researcher, as for 30 years, writing class students have on their own initiative often included photos with their work. Mainline publishers and educational organizations (perhaps due to vested interests) have adopted an overly cautious and inflexible attitude to innovation and development in this area. Recent major studies on the use of still images in TEFL (e.g., Goldstein, B. *Working with Images*, CUP, Keddie, J. *Images* OUP, both 2009) have also de-stressed the potential of students' own photos partly because publishers are still striving to keep control of classroom content and to combat declining text book sales. Countering this, the present researcher has proceeded over the course of several years to initiate detailed investigations into the use of the students' own photos as follows:

- Conducting regular, rigorous class surveys to assess student reaction to the personal photo method over a wide range of classes (from freshmen to senior) of levels (from beginner to advanced) and of modes and courses (including Conversation, Writing, Seminars, and so on)
- presenting at various international English language teaching conferences (IATEFL in the United Kingdom, TESOL in Cambodia, CULI in Thailand and JACET in Japan) and
- publishing classroom action research results informed by feedback from the above in refereed proceedings and academic journals (e.g. "Using Still Images for Spoken English Communication1-3." See **References** for details).

5. Main Aims

- To explore the effects of students' photos on written communication
- To assess if any positive effects like those consistently arising in conversation also occur when using photos for written communication

- To compare class reactions to writing with and without photos, and
- To consider the extent of potential future applications.

6. Background to the Students

The 30 student research subjects were in 1 of 3 fresher writing classes, part of the 11 compulsory writing classes overall from years 1 through 3 (all of 15 weekly 90 minute sessions in 1 of the 2 annual school semesters) in a 4 year Japanese university. This runs parallel with 10 conversation classes (optional for sophomore and junior students) of the same frequency and length to form the core EFL program. Some years ago, Writing and Reading classes were combined (both having been separate and independent as 2 of the 4 major language skills) due to the internal cutbacks on the number of credits for required courses demanded by the college's academic affairs authority, to bring the total number down to that of those departments with students not majoring in a foreign language, and to increase instead general basic subjects. While Writing and Conversation are required classes for students wishing to become future English teachers, the number of potential future Japanese teachers of English more than halved to only 10% of all English students as course entry acceptance and certification rates were cut under central educational authority pressure. This is unfortunate as more not fewer English teachers are urgently required with the recent but much belated introduction of compulsory English classes at elementary school many years after other less affluent Asian nations had introduced them, and without employing full-time English teachers, instead just retraining Japanese teachers of other subjects. Attrition also occurs locally. The researcher's own department faces cuts in full-time foreign teachers. Inadequate staffing can only frustrate national and local attempts to improve students' English mandated by the government, and contribute to the worsening crises and conflicts in educational policy-making and its enactment as Japan lags behind its neighbors and most of the world in its ability to communicate with and relate to non-Japanese. With Japan's second Olympics secured for 2020 and its growing interest in ASEAN which is strengthening its own English development, Japan's continuing foreign language deficiency portends further friction.

It was the first semester at college and students' first contact with a qualified native English speaking teacher for many. (The bargain basement high school Assistant Language Teacher system is limited to certain schools and infrequent visits, requiring only a university graduation certificate from an English speaking country in any subject with no TEFL expertise.) Most freshmen held exaggerated expectations or fears of English and of foreign teachers partly as their high school test oriented mindset drives many to escape study at the tertiary level. As double content subjects requiring a high volume of homework, Writing classes are larger and harder than Conversation classes. Even so, some of the optional Years 2 and 3 classes only run at 50% capacity in contrast with

Conversation classes prior to the changes mentioned above. It is possible and common for English majors to graduate with 45 hours of text-bound "Conversation" in their 4 years, while many less affluent Asian countries have long had more hours than that per year even for non−majors. The burden on writing classes is all the greater because of the extra reading element. Also as mine is the only one given by a native speaking teacher for Year 1 Writing, it may have been perceived as difficult by some class members. In addition, a computer room was used, rendering both teaching style and environment even more alien to new students, who often have little experience of using a computer to research or compose in a foreign language. To help compensate for some of the potential apathy and unfamiliarity with free writing even in their own language, let alone a foreign one, on the suggestion of this researcher the importance of communicative writing was highlighted by including it as 1 section in the department wide freshman test arranged by this writer. The positive reaction from students created extra motivation to write in English, which carried over into their Writing classes.

7. General Course Features (GCF)

The main components of the course included:

- Writing about oneself as opposed to textbook dictated topics
- consistently studying one's past through writing to promote proficiency in the use of the most frequent irregular verbs
- speaking about one's experience in pairs as a warm up motivator to develop vocabulary before writing
- keeping a diary about what each student does every day
- having one's mistakes thoroughly corrected and reviewed
- using the Internet to research information to write about
- writing to communicate something one knows using photos, and
- e-mailing and writing by hand to balance out smart phone thumbing.

8. Central Course Features (CCF)

To use photos in combination with a diary to motivate writing, CCF included:

Stage 1: class photos with the teacher in small groups, ice-breaker style

Stage 2: high school Golden Week photos versus university Golden Week photos

Stage 3: photos at high school versus photos at university, and

Stage 4: summer high school photos versus university summer photos.

9. Research Method

＊Feedback ＊formal evaluations ＊comparing other writing classes
＊itemizing perceived benefits ＊comparing them to Conversation
＊implications for future teaching and research, and
＊a past verb test to assess the effect on proficiency.

10. Questionnaire Method

*Students were given a week to read and consider the questions.
*They answered anonymously on a 4.0 point scale, from very good=4.0 (maximum) to very bad=0 (minimum), and 2.0=neither good nor bad.
Scores of positive* **3.1 plus *were considered significant.*
*The same question was asked from opposite viewpoints in pairs and in a mixed order so that the first item was not always a feature of each class.
*This confirmed or denied each feature's strength and derived a positive value of 2.1 plus, or a negative value of 1.9 and lower.
*Students could choose 1 or more questions to comment on and feature.

11. GCF Data: General Items

The differences between the 2 parts of each item (below 2 is negative):
(i) Studying your past through writing (versus textbook themes)= 2.7
(ii) Spoken practice to develop vocabulary before writing= 3.0
(iii) Keeping a diary about what you do every day versus not doing so= 3.0
(iv) Having all mistakes corrected/reviewed versus not doing so= **3.5**
(v) Using the Internet to research and write versus not doing so= 3.0
(vi) Writing for communicating about yourself in English= **3.2**
(vii) Both e-mailing and writing English by hand vs. doing neither or one= **3.1**

12. CCF Data: Photo Specific Items

These were asked as single points to rate and comment on:
(i) Using photos of past experiences to compare with recent ones= **3.5**
(ii) Using a comprehensive list of questions to choose which to answer= **3.4**
(iii) Using photos to communicate more enjoyably than otherwise= **3.8**

(iv) Using photos to say what you want and express your feelings better= **3.5**

(v) Using photos for more real communication than using a textbook= **3.6**

(vi) Using photos to motivate your writing more than otherwise= **3.3**

(vii) Using photos to write more meaningfully than otherwise= **3.3**

(viii) Using photos to write more effectively than otherwise= **3.5**

(ix) Using photos to write in more detail than otherwise= **3.5**

(x) Using photos to help remember what happened in more detail= **3.4**

13. Students' Comments

1. Writing about myself was very good as I could review my conduct.

Using past and recent photos was very good as I could see how I have developed.

2. Using photos for real communication is good to study practical English.

3. Using my photos for writing is good as it helped me write in detail and I could explain my memories more easily.

4. Not using a textbook for writing is very good as I can learn to write about myself and improve my self-expression skills. It is most important for us to think about ourselves. Using photos to help remember what happened in more detail is good. If I did not have any photos, I couldn't write so deeply. I could write more easily looking at my photos.

5. Keeping a diary about what I do every day is very good because I now use English better than previously. Using photos for more real communication than using a textbook is very good. By combining face-to-face communication I was able to talk happily.

6. Keeping a diary about what I do every day is very good to help me remember what I did and I want to come to be able to write what I think in English well. Both e-mailing and writing English by hand are very good because I can acquire writing ability. So I want to write in English. Using photos of our past experiences to compare with our present is very good because I can remember my experiences and I can gain more writing ability.

7. Not using a textbook for writing is good as I prefer this way and my writing ability improved by writing a diary even without a textbook. Using photos for more real communication than using a textbook is very good because I was able to achieve real communication with my classmates. Using photos to help remember what happened in more detail is very good as a photo can remind us of the events at that time.

8. We could increase how we express our thinking. Using photos to motivate our writing more than otherwise is good because I can express what happened more easily. I want to share photos more with my classmates to learn each other's opinion by thinking about each other's photos.

9. I don't feel much need for a textbook. Writing about myself is very good as I can know about myself

more. A comprehensive list of photo questions to choose from is very good as I can remember everything easily. Using photos to communicate more enjoyably than otherwise is very good because I like taking pictures and looking at them afterwards.

10. Using photos to communicate more enjoyably is very good because we can look back and enjoy our memories.

11. Keeping a diary is very good as I practiced English every day. Using photos to help remember what happened in detail is good as it made my experience easier for others to understand.

12. Writing about ourselves was good practice for expressing what we thought. Writing by hand was a rare experience nowadays. Using photos was a good idea. Our own photos promote recalling many things in more detail than trying to do so without them.

13. Not using a textbook for writing is very good because I could think for myself. Using photos of my past experiences to compare with more recent experiences is good because it stimulated my memory. Using photos for more real communication is much better than studying with a textbook because it was easy for me to think about myself.

14. Writing a diary is very good to improve our skills as it is better than writing something using a textbook. Using photos of our past experiences to compare with more recent experiences is very good because we can come to know about our friends' past more than without photos. I agree with using photos to write about our past experiences and memories as we can get to know each other better and learn how to communicate more clearly.

15. Using photos for more real communication is better as a photo is a more useful tool to relate to someone compared with a textbook.

16. Not using a textbook for writing is very good as I imagined a lot of things. I developed vocabulary and grammar. Using a comprehensive list of photo questions, I could choose the questions I liked so answering was fun!

17. Using a textbook for writing English is bad as I don't like textbooks or the examples in them. I think both e-mailing and writing English by hand are good because I could learn how to write English both on a computer and by hand.

18. Keeping a diary about what we do every day is very good because writing every day is useful to increase our English ability.

19. Spoken practice to develop vocabulary before writing is very good. Saying the words aloud is good for the brain. Using photos for more real communication rather than a text is very good as photos are real things.

20. Keeping a diary is very good for me and for my writing practice, too. Using photos to communicate is very good because I enjoyed choosing my photos and it is a good way to remember my experiences.

21. Keeping a diary about what we do every day is very good as I could learn new vocabulary. Using

photos for more real communication is very good because we could remember our past experiences and I don't like a textbook, because it makes me sleepy. Using photos instead was fun!!

22. Using photos to communicate more enjoyably is very good as it helps me remember and communicate happy times. I can remember what happened in more detail with my photos.

23. I think writing a diary is important to improve our writing skills. Using photos to write in more detail is very good as we can share experiences and communicate with friends, for example, when describing a nice meal I've had.

24. Keeping a diary about what we do every day is very good because I think that a natural text can be written by a diary. Using photos to communicate enjoyably is very good as those who read my experience after seeing a photo can understand more and I can remember my experience more by looking at my photo.

25. Using photos for more real communication than with a textbook is very good because we can communicate more effectively.

26. Using photos to communicate more enjoyably is very good because I can use my imagination more.

27. Writing about what we do every day creates an original diary. Using photos as well to help remember what happened in more detail is very good because I can remember enjoyable memories clearly by using photos.

28. By using English every day I progressed. Using our photos to communicate more enjoyably is very good as we can achieve lively communication.

29. I don't think using a textbook is fresh. Keeping a diary is very good as I can check my progress later. Using our photos to compare past and recent experiences is good to convey the details of the occurrences and write more effectively as others can understand the atmosphere at that time.

30. I prefer writing a diary about my memories to using a textbook. Comparing photos of past experiences with recent ones made me think more about my memories. Photos promote recall of events in detail.

14. General Comments

- While a class questionnaire may seem to duplicate the school wide questionnaires conducted simultaneously, the results and student comments presented in this paper (abridged due to space constraints) suggest that they go far beyond.
- Customized questionnaires are an essential tool which all teachers should feel professionally obliged to conduct to show academic accountability. In terms of quantity and quality, the questionnaire evoked serious and thoughtful responses from every student, 30 students out of 30 responding.

- The class questionnaire could also accurately measure all the salient aspects of the course, which the school wide questionnaires cannot as the questions there are general and often irrelevant, and may have a negative effect as students become increasingly reluctant to answer over the years.
- The fact that collecting formal feedback from seniors for the most important classes of their academic careers, their seminars, was abandoned a few years ago is regrettable as seniors now have no opportunity to comment.

15. Detailed Comments

The appeal of using photos for students is that they enjoy expressing themselves freely without the constraints of conventional textbook approaches. They are expert in content terms, which motivates them to write with greater authority and satisfaction. Their ability to write in detail increased by using photos as they felt confident about what they wanted to say and their recall was maximized. Their comments above revealed a number of frequently recurring observations. As a result of their experience their comments matured and became far more reflective than freshmen in other classes and years. Students felt that on a writing continuum (grammaticality through creativity) they were able to achieve improvement in both directions by developing greater accuracy and complexity. In combination with diary writing, they believed that they had progressed more than with a text, expanding their perspective of how writing acquisition can evolve. Thus they attested to satisfaction in all aspects of the use of their photos. The overriding impression that they had was of real communication with each other and their conclusion was that they wished to share their photos even more. The use of a list of questions to prompt expression pertaining to their photos proved successful as students enjoyed choosing those that they most wanted to answer, and this will lead on to more student interaction in future using the central computer monitor to display individual photos, then e-mailing each other questions and comments. Most students expressed a strong preference for photos over texts in their comments more explicitly than in their numeric ratings as they equated photos as “real things” leading to “real” and “more effective communication”. For the students photos epitomized treasured experiences helping them to convey in detail “the atmosphere at the time”.

16. Summary and Discussion of Formal Evaluations for Writing Classes

School wide evaluations center on the 10 points listed below, 1 through 5 concerning class content, and 6 through 10 concerning methodology:

1. Was the course theme clear?

2. Did the class closely follow the syllabus description?

3. Was the class at an appropriate level?

4. Could you study in as much depth as you wanted to?

5. Did you acquire broad and significant knowledge and proficiency?

Content section questions are contentious as such a general approach to many kinds of class is imprecise. Questions tend to be ambiguous and lack focus, and they seem beyond freshmen in particular to grasp or answer meaningfully. It is hard to find any overall or coordinated intention in the questions. They imply that if a class does not strictly adhere to its syllabus description it must be inferior somehow. Tertiary 2-way communication classes cannot be slavishly described and controlled. The most important learning experience has a spontaneous life and will of its own, so more vital than rigidly dictating outcomes is reflectively analyzing each class after the event. Individual students have different levels, so trying to assess a class based on the level that each student might like only produces questionable data. The most naïve question displays an assumption that in the limited time available students should achieve both breadth and depth of knowledge and proficiency. They spend more time on studying subjects beyond their major, including sport, religion and so on. As many start as beginners, it is unfathomable to expect them to master written English in such a short time.

6. Could you easily grasp what the teacher said?

7. Were the text book and teaching materials appropriate?

8. Did the teacher check if you had understood?

9. Did the teacher ask all students questions and make everyone participate intensively?

10. Did the teacher ensure that all students concentrated fully?

It is paradoxical to imply that all students should be at the same high level of complexity, yet at the same time that all the classes should be easy to understand. It is false to assume that all classes should have textbooks or materials, and that classes can somehow be measured only in terms of these. The current researcher has not used a textbook for 30 years, yet students respond consistently well to a text-free approach. To restate, the fundamentals of communication can neither be contained in nor bound by a textbook. Especially with freshmen student writing classes (which are larger and more difficult than conversation classes) to measure the class in terms of checking individually to see if students have understood everything (apart from the tautological nature of the question, duplicating as it does previous questions) defies logic as checking everything might slow the class down to a standstill, and again, would defeat the implications of other questions, suggesting that a higher, broader and more difficult level is expected.

This also applies to asking questions to every single student, as sheer numbers would limit a teacher with a larger class teaching a language that most students do not have sufficient facility to function in. Concentration is a subjective indicator of class achievement like most of the other points,

and obsessing about if might promote coercion rather than positive motivation. Overall the 10 questions are irreconcilable with each other, contradicting each other's assumptions and implications. The questions alone must confuse most students and the result can be seen in the rapid decline of respondent rates from freshmen to junior students and the increasing drop in and negativity of the attendant comments.

One size, shape and style cannot fit so many different classes and individuals, which again makes a strong case for customizing class questionnaires based on subject genres so that, especially for courses that are the most important for English majors (such as Writing and Conversation) a questionnaire for the most important skills that students pursue should be designed through the mutual cooperation of all the relevant teachers. Unfortunately such cooperation has yet to materialize, and until it does, research will be both blinkered and limited to the individual researcher as in this present instance.

Many of the formal questions seem too confused to answer meaningfully or objectively (even for teachers as witnesses the vagueness of their comments which are appended to class evaluations). Below is a summary of the background to and the actual results for all of the Writing classes from Year 1 through Year 3 with this researcher's data italicized. This is followed by some basic points of explanation to indicate the initial significance of the information that arose. To avoid any other teacher's results being individually identifiable, their results are arranged according to the year groups in which they were taught.

*Year 1 (3 classes in total)

1 class is taught by 1 Native Speaker (the author).

The 2 other classes are both taught by a Japanese teacher.

All 3 classes consist of 30 or more students.

*Years 2 and 3 (4 classes each, for a total of 8 classes altogether)

All are taught by a total of 5 Native Speakers, excluding the author.

On average there are 25 students per class.

*School ratings (school wide average 4.0, maximum score 5.0)

Year 1= 4.2 (*the author's = 4.3*); Year 2 = 4.0; Year 3 = 4.1

*% of students answering

Year 1 = 80% for the classes taught by Japanese teachers

= *100% for the author* ;

Year 2 = 75% on average; Year 3 = 70% on average

*% of students commenting (% of negative comments)

Year 1 = 1% (0% negative) for the classes taught by Japanese teachers

= *20% (0% negative) for the author* ;

Year 2 = 20% (50% negative); Year 3 = 4% (75% negative) on average.

The salient points arising from the above overview include:

- Students could complete their evaluations away from teachers. The previous school-wide average scores of class ratings dropped significantly from well over 4.0 (out a maximum of 5.0) down to 4.0 as the most common ranking
- year 1 Writing classes are 20% larger on average than years 2 and 3, with fewer FTs or foreign teachers (the current author is the solitary year 1 FT)
- year 1 Writing classes (especially the author's) rated their classes more highly on average than Years 2 and 3
- the number of students responding declined from Years 1 to 3
- the number of students commenting on classes taught by native-speaking teachers declined dramatically by Year 3, and
- the number commenting negatively increased from Years 1 to 3.

17. Conclusion

Without appropriate customization, the school wide questionnaires may be an under achieving resource that only manages to go through the motions of educational accountability with no possibility of ever fully achieving it. Insufficient faculty level discussion and inappropriate development regarding the formal questionnaires are concerning. The reluctance to discuss the matter at sufficient length can only risk a deterioration of educational standards resulting in an inferior product. In contrast, the detail, precision and insightfulness of these writing class students' comments were encouraging. Each student wrote at least a short paragraph (and some considerably more) despite being told that they needed only to select 1 point to write about. The original comments abridged above run to some 2,000 words. Compare this to the formal feedback and we can see that far fewer students responded – 20% less for this class – and all Writing class comments were less than 100 words in total per class at most, but mainly absent. Furthermore the situation becomes even more alarming if we look at other classes which had already experienced the formal evaluation system with far fewer sophomore students completing the school questionnaire and even fewer of them commenting. By junior year the situation is the worst with only 50% completing questionnaires, and barely a single comment. This is representative of questionnaires for the whole department, if not the whole school, where the norm for classes is no comment, raising serious doubts about how and even why students should be asked to comply. Even from an academic point of view, contrasting the 2 styles of questionnaire shows serious disparities on the part of the formal evaluation.

For school wide comments, English department respondents more often than not tended to use Japanese, while the comments for the Writing class questionnaire which the current author

conducted were all written in English, although students were in fact advised to write in Japanese as they were freshmen, if it meant that they would feel more comfortable expressing any detailed comments which they might have had. This clearly suggests that the in-class questionnaires were not only more informative, but also an actual learning experience in themselves for the students arising from the high levels of motivation that they generated. There was a very positive reaction overall to using photos for communicating in written English, as was demonstrated by the students' enthusiasm to write and the enjoyment created not only in the comments appearing above, but also in their diaries, undoubtedly stimulated in part by the interest arising from using their own photos. This was markedly different from my previous year's writing class, for example, where the students then did not use photos, and possibly as a result of this, were not as consistently motivated to write detailed diaries. In the previous class, for instance, some students only managed to submit shorter diaries, and had to be prompted on several occasions, while all the current year 1 students voluntarily completed theirs in a positive and timely fashion in the present investigation. Students unable to write as much as they wanted to in class time, for example, willingly stayed after class to finish their work. Even those with reservations about the General Course Features rated using photos to improve their writing very highly and seemed both visually and visibly impressed.

The next step stemming from this feedback will be for students to share their photos more in order to interact in the form of e-mailing questions to each other. To date this interaction was indirect to assess what reaction would first evolve (for example, the teacher would read parts of the diaries aloud or ask questions for the writers to identify themselves, in addition to briefly displaying photos on the central monitors while printing them out for students to file with their handwritten diary entries). As their responses frequently indicated the desire to share their photos more with each other, this seems to be the logical next step.

To return to the main aims of this study listed above, it is clear that the chief effect of using students' photos has been to motivate and enrich detailed and meaningful written English communication (Aim 1). Aim 3 has also been confirmed, as using photos has had more influence than the identical course in previous years where there was not as much overall and consistent benefit without photos. The students' comments above are proof positive of the enthusiasm generated as every student wrote in detail at the end of a long semester, undeterred by the Japanese summer heat wave! The final point, future applications, is discussed in detail below (Aim 4). Aim 2 ("to assess if any of the positive benefits seen consistently in spoken communication arise by using photos for written communication") can be assessed by comparing matching items in the questionnaires conducted over the past 3 years with the writing class students' evaluations above. Excluding points that apply only to speaking (such as using gestures) or to writing, the highest correlations were between the following 4 points – in both questionnaires these were the highest rated:

- Photos for speaking happily and for writing more enjoyably

- photos for communicating in speech how you feel and in writing to say what you want and express your feelings better
- photos for real communication about real culture in conversation and for more real written communication than using a textbook, and
- photos for using useful vocabulary and appropriate expressions in speaking and to write more effectively than otherwise.

Future photo topics may include summer travel, part-time jobs, festivals, and winter holidays, all of which would arise naturally between the September-February period comprising semester 2. A wall display and stress free 1 minute presentations using the central monitor, guided and supported by the teacher, could precede e-mailing questions to each individual student. Recipients could then answer the questions to make their next draft, rewrite and submit it.

The positive benefits indicated above would need to be reconfirmed in both the second semester of 2013 and in the new fresher writing class in 2014. The formal school wide evaluations, which became more open as students could complete them in most cases outside class on computers or smart phones beyond any influence of individual teachers, showed above average scoring for the class that was researched, and for the first time, this writer's Writing class reached the same high level of approbation as the Conversation class that used photos, so that both sets of students clearly rated the technique highly. However, there were markedly fewer comments overall, and the focus was different from the class survey due to the generalized one size fits all approach of the school wide questions, as indicated above. It may have also been the case that, as students answered the specific research questionnaire first, they felt it unnecessary to comment further on the use of their photos. Nonetheless, all the comments that were received were positive, and included favorable reactions to the use of students' photos in class. Here are the most representative comments that arose:

"The teacher helped us with English even outside the classroom."

"Using our own photos in class was very good."

"My ability to write improved as a result of keeping a diary."

18. Future Implications and Directions

I intend gathering a wider array of written events in future classes at this same Japanese university to determine the exact nature and degree of students' English communication development and the applicability of the methodology of employing students' own photos as an alternative to the deeply entrenched textbook approach which continues to dominate Teaching English as a Foreign language. At the school in question, for example, all but one each (this researcher's) of over 20 Conversation and Writing class courses are based on commercial textbooks of one kind or another. To establish scientifically whether or not there is any significant

improvement in Japanese university students' English communication skills when using the students' own photos as the central subject matter of their class, written and spoken data from students' class interactions would be analyzed over a sustained period of time and compared to a control group. Preparations to set up this phase of research should aim for an objective evaluation of the efficacy or otherwise of this project's student photo approach. The classes to be observed would be informed and student understanding and co-operation sought. The necessary materials, resources, equipment and classroom arrangements would be prepared to ensure a subsequent smooth data collection period. The relevant office staff, teachers and researchers involved should be familiarized with the procedural requirements. Their comments would be invited and acted upon as necessary. In the main period of investigation, after preparation and initial data collection, the class would be organized to enable various forms of samples to be taken, in the form of students' own handwriting, computer files and e-mails. Starting with initial entry samples, written events would be collected regularly, and the duration of the data collection period analyzed both in the short term after each class, and again on an ongoing and cumulative basis to observe if there are any specific or significant indications of progress (or decline) in the acquisition aims of the course involved. These would finally be analyzed in depth after the collection period finishes, confirming or denying the findings made at the various stages thereof. In the event that the anticipated development in students' English proficiency and motivation is too limited or not forthcoming, at the mid-way stage of the research, student feedback would be carefully analyzed via in-depth questionnaires in the students' own language to assess what aspects of the teaching approach need reconfiguring. While this would be an undesirable situation in one sense, it is hoped that any feedback will pinpoint the areas to be improved on in time to ensure that the method is successful. In the event that any fundamental changes are required to put the research back on track, methodological experience and expertise will prove essential in providing any necessary adjustments or re-directions. Even if students' linguistic development does not pose a problem, regular feedback should still be undertaken as it may make the approach more effective in either case. The research will therefore be open in the sense that it can provide many learning opportunities both for the students and the researcher. All the results that arise would be analyzed to determine the final nature of the outcome and findings to prepare for future presentation and publication. The research findings would be presented at the most relevant language conferences to collect feedback, informing their subsequent publication, to be submitted to various journals and expand interest in, and awareness and knowledge of the approach with the rigorous and credible analysis and dissemination of the same to validate or discount the results of the pre-research publications, as an academic audit of all that has preceded this research initiative, creating future teaching implications. In the first class where this approach was used, a past verb test was given only at the end of the course. The results were impressive with most students scoring nearly full marks on the 40 item test. As mentioned,

only an entry test essay was given, but in the context of the whole fresher group, so it was not specifically geared for use in assessing the development of my class.

One formally research based future approach would be to validate the indications of effectiveness that have been perceived so far through student feedback. To make any results more specific, it may be possible to measure student development through the following approaches:

- Comparing entry and exit assessments of students' writing ability in a communicative form with open essay questions
- conducting a past verb test at the start and end of the first semester
- incorporating more regular interactive photo use into students' diaries
- randomly selecting a sample group of 4 or 5 to monitor regularly, and
- analyzing the results by looking for any variation and indications of development such as the number of added morphemes.

It may be impossible to sufficiently isolate the effect of students' photos on their motivation and written development as their use is in conjunction with other GCF and CCF. For example, keeping a diary has consistently proved popular and been perceived by students as the backbone as it were to their writing, so the positive results in this investigation may have been dependent to a lesser or greater extent on the use of photos in the context of writing diaries. However, having compared the performance and response of students writing a diary without photos last year to those who wrote in combination with their own photos this time round, there are clear indications that personal photos are an, if not, the essential component in increasing student motivation and proficiency in writing. This is still a key aspect requiring closer attention in future, subject to the appropriate conditions being available, such as an external researcher to help ensure the validity of the assessment method, and to give the results greater verification than is possible under the present circumstances.

While the many problems surrounding English education in Japan are as stated beyond the individual teacher's authority to do anything about, on a promising note, after just recently explaining once more the undeniable problems caused by having Conversation classes compulsory only for first year students, the prospect of reinstituting years 2 and 3 Conversation as required subjects has arisen, and it is hoped that this will provide a fresh initiative to fundamentally overhaul the inadequacies of the text-bound approach to teaching that still dominates EFL teaching both in Japan as well as in many other countries.

Appendix 1 - Textbook Examples as used by other Writing Class Teachers

Voice of America Special English: Reading-Writing Spiral, Nanundo.

Can You Believe It? Book 3, Oxford University Press.
Read to Write, Back to Basics.
Sentence Writing, and Paragraph Writing, MacMillan.
Significant Scribbles, Pearson Longman.
Writers at Work: The Short Composition, Cambridge University Press.

Appendix 2 - Student Writing Samples

Space constraints prevent in depth analysis of students' writing samples. Students wrote diary entries over 4 months. The earlier and later entries reveal progression from short simple sentences to longer more complex ones, connected by a variety of conjunctions. The entries displayed more detail and precision, wider vocabulary and more added morphemes. The increases in accuracy, fluency and ease of composition are clear:

April entry (Student 1): *"I watched a movie with a friend. It was so funny."*

July entry: *"I went to do a part time job. After that I studied Korean very hard as I have a test next week so I can speak Korean more than before."*

April (S 2): *"We went out by car. I ate chanpon. It was spicy for me."*

July: *"I took part in an archery match with 2 team mates. I was nervous as it was my first match since entering university so I couldn't do so well."*

In both of the above examples the length doubled, and increases in complexity and fluency are demonstrated by the multiple linking of clauses, while more accuracy is evident, and *Japanese terminology* like that above disappeared.

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