

# Using Still Images for Written English Communication

## Part 2

### 'Voices from the EFL classroom'

**David John Wood**

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*Abstract: This study aims to establish if the same strong motivational power that using students' own photos as a stimulus for Japanese college students learning to write English indicated in the preceding study of the same title will be sustained in their follow-up course. The same thirty Japanese college freshmen English majors of similar ability studying writing received monthly assignments over the same length of study as previously. Instead of text books, they used their own photographs to stimulate their English expression and interact with each other, using a Dogme approach as one form of Active Learning. Their impressions of the course were re-examined both by in-class and external data in the form of the same two types of evaluation instruments. Their responses are compared both against each other, and against the previous investigation to identify which points stay the same and which and in what way any new points arising change. In addition, those areas that have been developed on the basis of the reactions to the initial research will be re-examined to see if and how they may be successful. The approach is also assessed in terms of linguistic development by ascertaining if there is any discernible difference in the accuracy, complexity and fluency of students' written English over the course of their classes. Finally the results will be put into the overall context of the students' curriculum to assess if the photo approach can be better served by modifying the current English teaching structure in one university and, by implication, in Japanese universities in general. It remains for any findings of linguistic proficiency development that become evident in this present consideration to be further investigated in a future study.*

*Keywords:*

*TEFL, Writing, Communication, Dogme, Active Learning, Images, Feedback*

## 1. Introduction, Overview and the “Dogme” Movement

This report (like the four in similar vein preceding it in the series of using still images for spoken and written English communication) aims for practical classroom improvement, deferring to students’ written feedback consensus as its referee of choice to understand and improve communicative TEFL in Japan. It is noteworthy that several of these studies have been deemed valid enough for preservation at national level in the form of those few academic articles that are selected for Tokyo’s *Society for the Preservation of Research Articles* founded in 1964 (E46 entries, **References**) from among all those in English that appear so often each year. Hopefully the trend will go on.

Subtitled this fifth instalment in the series “Voices from the EFL classroom” may emphasize the importance of listening to what students say, as our prime professional duty as educators and researchers in the field is to heed and respond accordingly, and one-way communication may fail to qualify as genuine communication at all. The discussion begins by reviewing “Dogme” (mentioned in the previous article on using still images for written English communication) and, although this current paper focuses on writing, continues with a follow up on the method as most recently applied to spoken communication, which is already in its third year, but still evolving as explained below. The later sections highlight the approach in reference to written communication, now in effect for a year. Photos present slices of their lives that motivate and help students to interact more in English, leading to valuable insights into our teaching and each other. As they are the sole experts of their own photos, this offers the students the confidence that texts cannot.

Dogme came to prominence in 2000, challenging the many vested interests long influencing an entrenched educational status quo. Its principles exist both under the name given them by Thornbury (see **References**) and in the many forms used by those employing similar tenets, whether full-scale or only in part. The English teaching school of Dogme is made up of a set of fundamental ideas that have confronted the control exerted by commercial text books over the classroom. Especially with mainline texts, the emphasis may too often be on grammar at the expense of communicative competency. In addition, many text books’ cultural bias can be inappropriate if not counter-productive to developing communication. While publishers do not endorse teaching without texts,

restoring responsibility to teachers for what is taught and how it is imparted is a high educational priority. Like politics and finance, the global EFL market has its own special interest advocates. Publishers' undue influence is indicated by the unvetted presentations at major language teaching conventions, denying more teachers speaking slots. Texts can be convenient for administrations, but sacrifice learners' individual needs.

Dogme ingredients may seem more conducive to a conversation class than a writing class, but the ambiguously speechless "conversations" and "chat" of the Internet, and social media's world-wide dismantling of the conceptual wall between spoken and written communication, have helped expand its potential. Dogme ideology individual ingredients most often cited include:

- \* Interactivity between teachers and students as the best path to learning;
- \* Engaging students through the content which they create themselves;
- \* Socio-conversational learning, jointly constructing knowledge and skills;
- \* Emergent language and grammar for optimal learning;
- \* Learners' voices, beliefs and knowledge being given fuller recognition;
- \* Students' and teachers' self-determination to forego the influence of texts;
- \* The use of materials which have relevance to and for the learners; and,
- \* Critical viewing of texts to reveal cultural and ideological biases.

## **2. Text Based versus Text Free EFL Conversation**

This research's premises are: (i) text based TEFL should not monopolize classes, and (ii) students' own photos are a powerful communication stimulus. Student feedback over 3 years supports this. In every course, the annual average of over 100 varied ability students preferring a text-free approach has exceeded 80%. Less than 20% preferred text books or were undecided. It is necessary to reconfirm this again before moving to the next stage, using students' photos for written communication in a text free environment, the main focus of this present study. My senior seminar students graduating in March 2014, with four years to experience and decide, were asked whether they preferred the text-free conversational segment of their seminars to using texts for conversation, as was the case with all of the other teachers' conversation courses they had taken. On average students had 5 semester-long conversation classes (4 was the minimum amount possible, 8 the maximum) in their 4 years, all but mine using texts. Of 20 seminar students, 15 responded. 13 (**86%**) preferred no text and only 2 (**13%**)

liked texts. The sole reason given for text use being it was easier for paper test reviews. The reasons given in favor of a text-free approach were numerous, stressing most of all “useful, happy and spontaneous communication”. There were no negative comments about text free conversation. Sample specific remarks included the following:

“I could think what vocabulary to use by myself”;

“I could experience real conversation”;

“When we use text books, we only fill in the blanks”; and,

“We could master conversation by thinking in English for ourselves.”

Without formal seminar student evaluation, a survey is essential. The logic behind this lack of educational quality assurance (“Seminars have too few takers to warrant formal evaluation”) is flawed as many have over ten takers. One of my seniors explicitly expressed regret at having no formal evaluation. Many evaluated classes have one student. Prior to 2014 classes, I was asked to visit a senior high school to give a spoken communication class as formal evaluations indicated my Year 1 class was the most popular of 20 school-wide oral communication classes. Not having met before was a rigorous test for the approach. The reaction shown by anonymous written comments received a week later was positive. As I was unaware there would be feedback, and as it was derived by their staff, the data became all the more valid and valuable. **80%** of replying students spontaneously specified text free teaching as the approach they perceived to be the most important to achieving communication. None indicated any preference for a text based approach. This supported three years of surveys conducted with fresher to senior student responses at my university. Other features popular with the high-school students included:

- \* Maintaining eye contact, not possible with a text-bound approach;
- \* The importance of overcoming one’s fear of making mistakes;
- \* Aiming for communication above accuracy;
- \* The importance of motivation beyond passing exams; and,
- \* Maintaining communication flow by turning questions around.

Using photos for spoken and written communication is a potentially powerful element in successful TEFL. While the most relevant texts for each situation can be valuable references, the reality in an age with so much material online is that our traditional TEFL texts may fast become obsolete. As sharing projects of

various kinds already exist, teachers are professionally obliged to find and customize the best methods and materials for their context, instead of giving all the responsibility to an external materials writer who may know too little of our students or situations to dictate their class proceedings.

### **3. Students' Photos for Spoken Communication**

This was the sixth class using students' photos for spoken communication. In 4 undergraduate years, English majors need only take conversation in the first (also all the spoken communication study required of prospective English teachers here) averaging less than an hour a month. Second and third years classes are optional, reducing English Department students' required spoken communication course time to the same amount as non-English majors' level, because some of the latter have the same one year-long compulsory class.

The process for 16 ninety minute classes evolved greatly in several ways. To ensure students functioned more independently than previously, the teacher remained resolutely silent during conversations. This was not easy as the urge to jump in at every stage to correct, guide and control cannot be easily resisted. Most if not all students are conditioned to expect nothing else. Naturally, live support in moderation may help students in some ways real-time during their actual conversations, but the balance between helping and hindering natural communication flow is delicate. Interruptions can deny them any chance of determining what kind of communication they want, damage their will to speak and even deny them the chance to learn. The result spoke for itself as no students resisted or hesitated, and all developed their confidence each session, as was demonstrated by the way they gradually stopped looking at the teacher, achieving real face to face English communication with each other instead.

The only guidance involved was for ten minutes preceding their conversations, followed by limited debriefing at the end, and a brief review of the gist of their interactions at the start of the next class to ensure continuity. The teacher's role was only to explain some possible goals in advance without wresting the momentum or desired direction away from the students. So to this end, before giving the floor to the students, the teacher clarified that the primary aim for them was experiencing independent communication through concerted interaction only among them to build fluency and de-stress accuracy. In contrast to previous years, students were told to ask and help each other more, marking a

distinct new stage and the next logical phase in the developing methodology based on the successful experimentation so far.

Various control features were implemented, several mentioned previously:

- \* Students brought travel photos of their local, national or international visits, enlarged for better visibility. The teacher first described the main components to introduce some of the English vocabulary and its pronunciation for the first round of questions when students ask background questions, like:

*Where's this? Who are the people there? When was it? Why did you go there?* Interviewees work with interviewers to ask each other to repeat as necessary. If answering "No" they continue "but" to add even an indirectly related point;

- \* Class layout – students sat in a circle in a small room. There were 2 interviewees per class on average, and 18 interviewers asking questions in order of the seating arrangement. Round 1 questions centered on interviewees' photos to establish the basic facts and immediate context of the events shown;

- \* Conversational pace – the thinking time that students allow themselves is as important as the speaking time, so there are no time limits to ask questions. The validity of this is that some students who seem agonizingly slow at asking questions actually produce the most interesting and thoughtful interchanges;

- \* Input rate and content – students could control their own speech rate, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, creating active and co-operative scaffolding, including requests for repetition, re-phrasing, and correcting each other in interchange breakdowns. The resultant sense of mutual responsibility meant that students could invest more energy in their communication than if they had been teacher dependent. The more linguistically able students were happy to help the less able, and those being helped felt less embarrassed than when corrected by the teacher, which for shy Japanese students is paramount;

- \* Subject range – in a second more detailed round of questions, more extensive and detailed background information about the photos was elicited, prompting points past, present and future not directly related to the photos, as the talk's direction took on a life of its own. While new questions resulted, students gained self-assurance by mastering a set of regular questions they could revert to automatically thus sustaining the impetus. Subsequent students could refer back to previous answers to pursue those lines, or depart from them completely to ask their own questions. Simple techniques to extend a conversation include asking:

*Why? For example? Tell me more, and so on;*

\* Interaction flow – a central goal was communication continuation to avoid single word “Yes” or “No” exchanges. Instead, students were required to keep talking, so if they had no information to give, they had to change the topic to something that they could talk about, as well as to turn questions round and ask the questioner “How about you?” as most questions indicated the questioner’s interests. They could thus interact spontaneously to sustain flow;

\* Humor – with students’ confidence increasing, natural humor arises, which attracts interest and intensifies the desire to concentrate harder and understand. The teacher must also try to follow the details and direction of the humor, and may gain increased insight into his or her students’ interests as a result;

\* The teacher’s role – the first few classes were for students’ to introduce themselves, with the first session for preparation, and the second for rehearsal, so the teacher could give comments between sessions about how to improve after each presentation. The next session was for their revised presentation, when they were videoed with no interruptions. The final session was to replay the presentations to review both content and delivery, and enjoy being quizzed. This helps any students absent as well as creating a future reference resource.

As students become less concerned about being videoed, when they bring their photos in subsequent sessions, they are more relaxed than they would have been otherwise. This is important as most have never been interviewed in English live, let alone videoed doing so! Videoing has multiple benefits. It focuses energy and concentration, and can be used in the following class for various purposes. It is a vital resource as it can show any important changes (good or bad) occurring from the earlier to the later sessions. By aiming to remain silent throughout the actual filming, the teacher can concentrate on using the equipment more, ensuring careful recording and his or her silence and non-interference, building more student independence and responsibility.

As indicated, on average two students bring photos each time to ensure variety and mutual support, and if one is absent, having a second also serves as a back-up. About ten sessions are required depending on the exact class size and attendance, but if more time is taken than expected, as the students in the final sessions have the most confidence, more than two at a time is possible.

The final classes are for evaluation. At this time, the teacher interviews



students about their photos along the same lines as the class content, but the pace naturally picks up because of growing student confidence and experience. While no videos were made of the final interviews (as the teacher needed to concentrate on interviewing) the more natural situation for spoken communication relaxed students. Recording tests is an option to be considered, though. Here is a sample interaction of a segment of an in-class conversation:

Q. What do you want to go on a trip next time? A. Where?

Q. Sorry, where do you want to go on a trip next time? A. *To Thailand.*

Q. Why? A. *I would like to see temples.*

Q. Is she your host family? A: *Yes, I went to Australia for 2 weeks.*

Q. How old is she? A. *She is 19 years old.*

Q. Did you speak only English? A. (hesitantly) *Yes, I did.* (class laughter)

Q. What was your favorite place? A. *A pub I went to with friends on Fridays.*

Q. Did you go to a club? A: *Yes, sometimes I went there.*

This segment is in the middle of an interview. It displays important features, two of which are underlined. First there is some grammatical scaffolding when the questioner makes a mistake in the question. The student being questioned readily volunteered help by asking if the questioner meant “where” instead of “what”. The other students’ laughter later on was also notable as it showed that they understood that when the student being answered paused, she was in fact mocking herself. As stated above, humor is a driving force in conversation, and many students both visibly enjoyed and benefitted more from their weekly interactions as a result. This example shows how photos progressively become a springboard to expanding face to face communication about the experience and any related circumstances before, during and after it.

For the survey, 16 of the registered 19 students responded:

(1) *The average number of semester-long conversation classes taken was 5*

(6 was the maximum possible, of 2 semesters a year, from years 1 through 3.)

(2) *The number of such classes taught with print or cyber CD rom texts was 4, confirming this current class’ syllabus as the only one not text bound.*

(3) *The number of Year 3 Semester 1 conversation takers was 5 of 16, or 30% (confirming the equivalent text based class was seriously undersubscribed.)*

\* *Preferred approach/differences the students noted **not using a text book**:*

“I was able to use real conversation and express my own experience.”

“I liked this class because I could enjoy conversation with class mates.”

“The less we used a text, the more we could communicate.”

“With no text, we could enjoy a variety of different communication styles.”

“I could improve my English skills with my friends.”

“Not using a text helped us achieve face to face communication.”

“I could acquire the ability to listen and speak in English.”

“It was good to express my own experience in real English.”

“I loved communicating with my classmates!”

“We only read written conversations when using a text which were unreal.”

“Text books were an obstacle to talking face to face.”

“Text books prevented me communicating with other students.”

“I liked this class because I learned how to experience using real English.”

*(No one indicated that **using a text book** was their preferred approach.)*

*(4) The most frequent **use of a textbook** was **listening to the teacher**.*

*(This was cited by **50%** of students. No other specific responses were given.)*

*(5) When asked if they thought **using a text** or **not using a text** was better:*

***81%** or **13/16** answered **not using a text** is better;*

***6%** (1) preferred **using a text**; and, **13%** (2) gave **no answer**.*

*(6) and (7) When asked which of 8 items they thought **a text book** was the best for, and which they thought **not using a text** was the best, out of **16** students:*

***9** students chose **not using a text** for **real conversation** and **communication**.*

***2** students chose **using a text** for **vocabulary** or **grammar improvement**.*

*(8) and (9) Students were asked to rate **not using a text** versus **using a text** for communicative effectiveness for these points. The average ratings for all students were as follows (the most significant differences being in bold):*

*1 very bad; 2 not good; 3 neither good nor bad; 4 good; and, 5 very good*

*(8) **Not using a text:***

*(a) **4.5** speaking to others in English*

*(b) **5.0** communicating what you want to say*

*(c) **4.5** communicating how you feel*

*(d) **5.0** using gestures to communicate*

*(e) **4.5** using real English*

*(f) **4.0** communicating real culture*

*(g) **4.0** communicating about real people*

- (h)  using useful English vocabulary
- (i)  using expressions appropriately
- (j)  speaking in English happily

**OVERALL AVERAGE = 4.45 (good)**

**(9) Using a text:**

- (a)  speaking to others in English
- (b)  communicating what you want to say
- (c)  communicating how you feel
- (d)  using gestures to communicate
- (e)  using real English
- (f)  communicating real culture
- (g)  communicating about real people
- (h)  using useful English vocabulary
- (i)  using expressions appropriately
- (j)  speaking in English happily

**OVERALL AVERAGE = 2.75 (not good)**

**(10) When asked if they had any other comments, students replied as follows:**

“There are too few classes like this one.”

“I was happy that there were so many chances to speak in English.”

“We had to use English and so we developed.”

“It was great to talk about the things we liked without the hindrance of a text book, so I could really enjoy this class.”

“I could improve my English skills in this class – it was great fun!”

“It could improve my ability to communicate in English without a text book.”

“It was hard for me to think and speak in English, but I really enjoyed it.”

“I was able to communicate naturally without a text book.”

“I really felt that I improved.”

“I felt really happy in this class.”

“I could make new friends and enjoyed communicating in English.”

“I enjoyed speaking about and listening to my classmates’ experiences.”

“I was not confident at first, but this class gave me confidence.”

“It was great to think and speak in English thanks to not using a text.”

#### **4. Students’ Photos for Written Communication - Overview**

Based on the consistently positive student feedback received in spoken

communication classes, the technique of using students' own photos to develop their communicative ability was adapted for trial with my compulsory Year 1 written communication class of 30 students aged 18. Average ability for all 100 first year English majors is low at around 300 out of 990 in TOEIC on entry, but generally higher for the surveyed class as they are selected by a commercial English proficiency selection test. As the exam is imprecise, the attempt to stream the highest proficiency students is less than 50% accurate.

In addition, as the high school English that they had taken was exam bound stressing rote memory, grammar and English to Japanese translation, with little or no exposure to qualified native English speaking ESOL teachers, their actual communicative ability, both written and spoken, is below average. The skills they have are limited, passive and undeveloped. General problems with program design, staffing size and so on were detailed in the previous paper. In the first semester there is only one first year class with a native speaker (that of this researcher) but from the second semester, all the writing classes are taught by native speakers, allowing more scope to compare student reaction to the various approaches. All the other classes are taught by text books. (See the **Appendix** for the texts used to teach written communication in semester 2.)

In the first semester, students used their photos once a month, showing any event or occasion that was important to them, following self-taken photos being taken together in the first class. Details of specific topics and treatment for the first semester (for example, photos relating to an event before entering university from their high school lives, holidays such as the Japanese early May "Golden Week" and so on) are in "Using Still Images for Written English Communication (Part 1)". The photos and writing were displayed for all to view and choose their favorite. The overwhelming reaction was that they wanted to see more of each other's photos to give and get feedback. The next semester, they first used summer holiday photos, printed out and circulated. They wrote questions about everyone else's photo by the side or on the back to get more information, and the answers were then combined with the photos. The approach was modified with brief explanations of their photos written first before showing fellow students to create more interest and give more direction for others' questions to increase in meaning, depth and variety. The teacher checked their rewritten versions and underlined only basic errors, so that after three revised drafts, the final versions

were well accomplished photo essays, incorporating their self-edited photos for increased visual impact.

### **5. Second Semester - Main Aim**

Based on the feedback from the first semester, the central aim in the second semester was to incorporate more regular interactive photo use into students' diaries. This was achieved through the questions students wrote to each other about everyone's photos, stimulating clearer and more detailed recall of the incidents relating to the events, and in turn expanding the range of the subject.

### **6. General Course Features (GCF)**

As in the first semester, the main components of the course included:

- \* Writing about oneself, not textbook dictated topics;
- \* Consistently studying one's past through writing;
- \* Speaking about one's experience in pairs as a warm up motivator;
- \* Keeping a diary about what each student did 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
- \* Both writing by computer and by hand.

### **7. Central Course Features (CCF)**

To use photos in combination with a diary to motivate writing, the second semester central course features included using their photos to write about:

Stage 1: summer to compare with pre-university summers;

Stage 2: part time jobs, and club or free time activities;

Stage 3: festivals to compare with pre-university ones; and

Stage 4: their New Year experiences to compare with the past.

### **8. Second Semester – Specific Aims**

- \* To distinguish from speaking, as there is no guarantee of immediate feedback to indicate communication breakdowns in writing, students aim for the lowest common denominator: readers unfamiliar with Japan and Japanese;
- \* To establish an explicit and comprehensible viewpoint for cultural and linguistic contexts so that aspects of Japan and of students' "idiocultures" (or personal cultural features) are expressed clearly in high frequency English;
- \* To extend the photo range by inviting varied topics both directly contained or indirectly suggested, and optimize the pace for various student ability levels,

allowing students to extend their treatments if they progress more quickly, or more time to complete assignments for those whose progress is slower;

- \* To ensure enough production stages for writing development so that students have enough sessions over the course of several classes to allow the individual writing styles to mature more and grasp the importance of re-writing by seeing their writing through each other's eyes, not only their own or the teacher's;

- \* To emphasize the necessary accuracy goals (common irregular past forms, plural versus singular use and agreement, avoiding or explaining sufficiently proper nouns and words that may be culturally opaque) while de-stressing the need for complete accuracy in more complex cases like articles and so on, as being of more secondary importance to overall communication;

- \*To identify writing strategies enhancing communication, like clarifying verb subjects, using high frequency vocabulary, preferring active verb forms, using short sentences and establishing logical development of expression;

- \* To use photos in conjunction with diaries, zooming in on specific events or scenes, connecting past, present and future to allow expansion of subject areas by going beyond the immediate boundaries of the photo to explore all possible spin-off directions that expand student communication in various ways;

- \* To develop various aspects and levels of self-disclosure within student's individual comfort zones so that they write freely and without tension; and

- \* To promote learner autonomy to foster self-development and responsibility by independent self-motivation and more self-guided direction.

## **9. Photo Essays and Diary Samples and Analysis**

**Photo#1** (*A summer firework festival - see building below for scale*):

“I went to my grandparent's house. I went there by car. I was there because my relatives gathered together. I was there for three days. It was August 13th. I had (the) barbecue there. I did it because it is the routine event once a year. (There) were all my relatives. I thought that it is ( ) very important time for me to spend with my family and relatives. I went to a summer festival with my cousin next day. I do it once a year. I would love to do it again.”



**Photo#2** (*Jumping on a snow-board slope*):

“I like snow-boarding very much. I have been going since I was ( ) elementary school student because it looked so cool. Though I’m crazy about snow-boarding, I don’t like skiing so much. So I went snow-boarding many times last year and I will do it this year too. I did it 3 times in December last year. This picture was taken by my uncle. He is a very nice snow-boarder. He always takes me to the ski slope and teaches me. We stayed there 5 hours. Someday, I would like to go abroad and go snow-boarding there too. There are good places for me to do it in Canada and America. Snow-boarding is exciting so I recommend it. If you could go to a ski slope, you should try it.”

*(Snow-boarding has become very popular with Japanese students recently.)*

**Photo Essay#1** dates from late September 2013, the start of Semester 2, and **Photo Essay#2** is from early January 2014, semester’s end. In both cases, it is the medial draught of the same student’s photos, showing responses to questions from other students, and some level of self-correction following the teacher’s underlining inaccuracies occurring in initial draughts. To protect students’ privacy, photos without faces are used, with permission. With **Photo Essay#1**, there were also family gathering pictures (not shown).

One notable development is the smoother assimilation of answers to other students' questions so that, unlike the earlier case, the edited product doesn't just read like a staccato list of responses in the latter, but a more smoothly flowing transition. This is evinced by the longer sentences of increasing complexity in the form of the comparatively advanced degree of connectives, resulting in a comparatively sophisticated sentence structure. The viewpoint has expanded as is shown by the use of not just "I" as the subject (as in **Photo Essay#1**) but also "He", "We", "Snow boarding" etc. **Essay#2** reaches out more by recommending we try it. The maturity of style was achieved in part by the development of other students' questions, suggesting increasing co-operation among class members. Students were writing in more detail though both cases were the result of the same amount of time being allotted to the two activities.

To quantify the development from **#1** to **#2**, three aspects can be observed:

(i) Accuracy (the amount of control that a learner has over such language categories as prepositions, articles, use of the verb *be* and pronouns):

**Essay#1** shows 3 such parenthesized errors, while **Essay#2** has only 1 error.

(ii) Complexity (the willingness to use a variety of forms) which may be indicated by the number of added morphemes per sentence and the number of dependent clauses per text divided by the number of sentences per text:

**Essay#2** has 2.3 times more the number of added morphemes, and 2.5 times more the number of dependent clauses per sentence than **Essay#1**.

(iii) Fluency (the written language production speed) measurable through the dependent clauses over average sentence length in words (**#1**=7.8, **#2**=10.5):

For **#1** this is  $1/7.8$  or 0.13, and for **#2**, it is  $4/10.5$  or 0.32, over twice as high.

Despite the simplistic analysis, all aspects show consistent signs of increase.

A comparable diary writing maturation was also evident from September (Paragraph 1 below) to January (Paragraph 2). In both cases the entries are the same student's and sequence lengths of 4 days immediately after an extended break from school. Later entries show similar but more limited development:

Paragraph 1: "Today I came back to school. I ate noodles after a long time. I was praised by a manager. I was happy. It was my friend's birthday. I gave presents and ate cake. I studied Korean. It was so difficult for me so I hate it. I like English better than any other language." (*Paragraph 2 is 30% longer.*)

Paragraph 2: "I came back to school. It is cooler than my home town. I ran



around the park with my friend. Running is good for my health and I could be refreshed. I went to karaoke with my sister. She is a good singer, and when she sings, I always start to sleep. Today I played volleyball with my friends. One of my friends is a very good player so I often play with her.”

#### **10. Semester 2 Writing Class Feedback and Comments**

As in semester one, a class survey was conducted. Students were given a similar set of questions and a week to complete them. Unlike the first semester survey, many points focused exclusively on different aspects of using photos, not requiring students to compare a text based approach. 29 students out of 30 responded. One was absent.

The overall impression in their general comments below was a feeling of a marked improvement from Semester 1 (Comments specifying photos only are shown, but others also implied their use):

“Using photos was pleasant and enabled me to write English.”

“Thanks to using photographs, I could write in more detail.”

“Photos are about us so they are better than textbooks.”

“It was great to share photos and thoughts with others.”

“I was very glad to see my classmates’ pictures.”

“Using photos makes it easier to remember.”

“I enjoyed introducing my photos and seeing other students’ photos.”

“Using photos made for more real communication.”

“Using photos motivated me to write more than a text book.”

“I could write with more interest with photos than textbook exercises.”

“Writing an introduction to our photographs made it easier to understand.”

“My photos showed what I’d done during the periods that we hadn’t met.”

“I learnt what others wanted to know more about from their questions.”

“Editing my photos made it more interesting.”

“Using photos made study more fun and helped me express my feelings.”

“Photos are better because I don’t like text books.”

“Comparing past and recent experiences with photos is a good way to study.”

“Photos show our real experiences so they are good for real communication.”

“It is easier for me to write using my photos than a text book.”

“Other students’ questions about my photo helped me notice things I didn’t.”

“I can write more concretely and avoid vagueness using photos.”

“Photos are good as I want many people to know about my experiences.”

Students were then asked to rate the following aspects of using their photos for written communication: 2-3=bad; 3-4=neither good nor bad; 4-5=good

**(i) photos to compare past and recent experiences=4.8**

**(ii) photos to communicate more enjoyably=4.7**

**(iii) photos to say what you want to & express your feelings better=4.7**

**(iv) photos for more real communication than a textbook=4.75**

(v) photos to motivate your writing more than otherwise=4.4

(vi) photos to write more meaningfully than otherwise=4.5

(vii) photos to write more effectively than otherwise=4.5

(viii) photos to write in more detail than otherwise=4.5

**(ix) photos to help remember what happened in detail=4.7**

(x.) writing an introduction about your photograph=4.6

(x.i) showing your photos to other students=4.3

(x.ii) writing questions about other students' photos=4.3

(x.iii) answering others' questions about your photos=4.6

**(x.iv) re-writing your introduction=4.8**

(x.v) editing your photos' appearance=4.3

**(x.vi) photos for writing about summer experiences=4.75**

(x.vii) photos for writing about what you did in the second semester=4.6

**(x.viii) photos for writing about your winter holiday=4.7**

## **11. Areas for possible improvement**

The aspects of photo use most appreciated by students appear in **bold**. Underlined lowest ranking items are high but areas for possible improvement.

While some were shy about sharing photos, the idea for this arose naturally from the recommendations from Semester 1 feedback. Other points included:

- \* Avoiding having students ask the same questions;
- \* Including questions from the teacher; and
- \* Making photo editing optional.

As these points were addressed prior to students using photos at the start of semester 2, next time the same points may need more careful explanation. Comments were more positive than their ratings for (x.i) and (x.ii) show.

## **12. School-wide Evaluations Context Comparison of Writing Classes**

The impact of the approach can best be highlighted by comparing the overall

averages of all 12 Writing classes during **Semester 2** in the school year 2013-2014, all taught by native English speakers. As in Semester 1 (when the unofficial school-wide average was 4.0) the maximum possible rating is 5.0.

\*For **Year 1**, the average was **4.4**;

\*For **Year 2**, the average was **4.1**; and

\*For **Year 3**, the average was **4.3**. (The average for all **Years 1-3** was **4.27**.)

(My class scored **4.9**, the highest ranked class, and the only one not to use a text book. The school wide average exceeded Semester 1's 4.0 by just a little.)

As in Semester 1, the comments made by students on the school wide evaluations for Writing classes were very limited in number, making the survey conducted in my class all the more important, as without feedback and change, we will be doomed to repeat our mistakes and fail to take professional responsibility for the work we are trained and paid for. My class made 7, all positive comments. (E.g.: "I really enjoyed seeing my friends' photographs.")

Other Year 1 classes received only half as many comments, several of which were seriously negative, and there were even fewer comments in Years 2 and 3, on average half negative and half positive. One comment that stood out from the worryingly low response rate for the other 11 classes, in view of the related point that was made in the introduction about the importance of two way communication, was: "*Please listen to what we say more carefully.*"

### **13. Conclusion**

On the basis of students' reactions given in this second study of using photos for written communication, the approach seems to be as promising as for spoken communication. The continuing appeal of the latter was first demonstrated from a range of sources - the recent seminar and conversation class, and an impromptu high school visit. Reactions in writing classes were also measured from different standpoints, a class only evaluation and the school wide equivalent. Every time, the results were strongly positive. Subjects not only maintained enthusiasm, but seemed increasingly convinced by their continued experience of textless photo-based written communication, providing extensive insights, comments and evaluations.

On my own survey (which my class had a week to complete anonymously) and the school-wide evaluations completed out of class, students expressed clear support for using their own photos, diaries and the feedback from both each other

and the teacher. The formal feedback was significant as this was the first full year of independent school-wide evaluations, completed without the pressure of previous evaluations conducted during their actual classes. This made English majors' results more objectively comparable with all other teachers' classes using texts.

In view of the situation facing Japanese college students of English, more support for innovation to fulfil the national education ministry's faltering communication goals for English education should take priority over research support for the many less actionable applications approved each year. The following issues especially are of a high priority and must not be ignored:

- \* The number of compulsory spoken communication classes is too low;
- \* Most methods used are not the best for developing communication; and
- \* If not encouraged, students' motivation to communicate may be negated.

This approach needs sufficient support in the form of funding for external statistical validation to confirm the informal results consistently obtained over three years. Regular refereed research publication and conference proposal acceptance attest to its potential, as do the many voices listed above, and the recent record numbers of students enrolling in my classes. In the latest 2014 optional year 3 Conversation courses, mine had twice as many students as all others combined, averaging 30.5 takers each. The 4 text based ones had 14.5. As we swap classes in semester 2, the comparison is both accurate and valid.

### **Appendix – Texts Used by Other EFL Writing Teachers**

*Writers at Work; Writing Essays; Ready to Write; Can You Believe it; Comparative Culture Workbook; Paragraph to Essay; Writing Without Tears.*

(In addition, various readers were used)

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