

Gratitude Project: Writing, Reading, and Reporting

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This paper is focused on a project in a Japanese university English writing class for which students wrote letters of gratitude in their language of choice and delivered the letters to people they had not previously thanked properly. Their assignment was to plan their own gratitude visit and to record their emotional reactions, as well as those of the receiver of the letter. Students described their emotions after reading their letters aloud to the receiver. My aims in this paper were (a) to discuss the effects of writing letters of gratitude, (b) to describe the letter-writing project, and (c) to discuss the value of having students explore their emotional changes by recording their activities after completing the assignment.

本研究は、日本の大学における英語作文の授業の一環として感謝に関するプロジェクトに焦点を当てる。クラスの学生は、これまで十分に感謝の意を表すことのなかった相手に対し、自分で選択した言語で感謝の手紙を書き、手紙を届けた。本活動は学生が自ら感謝の気持ちを表す計画を立て、実施の際の自分と受取った人の気持ちを記録するものであった。学生は、手紙を届けた際に声に出して読み上げた後、その感情について説明した。本論の目的は (a) 感謝の手紙を書くことの効用を論じ、(b) 手紙を書くプロジェクトを説明し、(c) 本活動を通じて学生の感情の変化を探究することである。

THIS PAPER introduces a project in an educational setting designed to have students express gratitude to people whom they feel they have not properly thanked, reflect on their emotional growth and interpersonal experiences, and develop writing skills through writing a letter and recording the process. Introducing activities about gratitude helps students equip themselves with academic and social skills. Based on their research, Froh and Bono (2014) suggested that grateful teens were more satisfied with their lives and hence more engaged in schoolwork and hobbies than their counterparts. Furthermore, the skill of expressing gratitude in an appropriate manner is important for students who are expected to communicate in the global community.

In EFL classrooms, some students need to cope with the stress of writing in English caused by their lack of confidence. Lyubomirsky (2007) stated that expressing gratitude strengthens one's self-worth and self-esteem, indicating that realizing how much other people have done for oneself and recognizing one's accomplishments leads to feeling more confident and efficacious (p. 93). The opportunity to write a letter of gratitude, read it out loud, and report on the experience is a step to helping students gain confidence and overcome language barriers. Thus, this project was designed to help students in a Japanese university English writing class explore the meaning of gratitude and enhance language and communication skills.

Studies of Gratitude

The term gratitude, deriving from the Latin word meaning grace, graciousness, or gratefulness (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), can be both personal and social. Sansone and Sansone (2010) defined gratitude as “the appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to oneself” and stated that it “represents a general state of thankfulness and/or appreciation” (p. 19). These statements suggest that the word can express an individual state of mind as well as the concept of appreciation in general.

Letters Expressing Gratitude

There have been proposals for teaching and exercises on writing letters to important individuals, as well as making *gratitude visits*, in which the sender and receiver of the letter can share happy feelings (Ben-Shahar, 2010; Seligman, 2002). These activities provide students with opportunities to practice the social skill of expressing appreciation to others.

When introducing this activity in class, it is essential that the activity be applied appropriately within the students’ educational environment. In an interview, Kramsch explained the term *symbolic competence* both as “an awareness of what words index or connote in a particular context” and “the ability to reframe these words when used in a different context” (Hourdequin, 2014, p. 10). In this sense, careful planning of whom to write to, what to thank the receiver for, and how to deliver the letter needs to be set in each student’s context. Most importantly, appropriate words expressing thankfulness should be selected to convey the message.

Reframing the English word *gratitude* within each student’s context and sharing their experiences in class provide an opportunity for them to develop their linguistic and communicative competence. For example, in Japanese culture, which is often viewed as emphasizing *high-context communication* (coined by Hall, 1976), the bulk of information is not transmitted as explicitly as in cultures of

low-context communication. In other words, gratitude is often not expressed in words in Japanese culture. A student may face an awkward situation when reading a letter to a receiver due to cultural differences of when and how to express their emotions. However, for students interested in developing a cross-cultural awareness of concepts such as gratitude, the first step is applying its original meaning to the context of their own culture so that they can later reframe it in the context of other cultures and situations. In other words, hands-on experience with gratitude helps students lay the foundation for cross-cultural competence.

As a guide to how a letter can be written, Helgesen (2012) in his “ELT & the Science of Happiness” suggested that because people in the Japanese culture often do not express emotions very directly, it is useful to insert a paragraph in the Japanese version of the letter explaining that the English teacher has asked the student to write it as an assignment (p. 1). This makes sense because the written statement explaining that it is part of class assignment helps the receiver of the letter understand the mission of the writer. Parents, friends, or others in a close relationship with the writer are often eager to cooperate in the class assignment, which reinforces smooth communication.

The Gratitude Project in a Writing Class

English language classes at university serve as a platform for students to practice face-to-face communication, as well as strengthen language and social skills that prepare them for future intercultural experiences. Although extensive research has been conducted in psychology, it is a relatively new idea to use gratitude visits as a means of exploring the emotional impact and fostering communication skills in EFL classrooms. The gratitude project is designed to develop four learning areas, as shown in Figure 1: planning, language skills, communication skills, and reflection opportunities.

Planning

Students plan how to express gratitude face-to-face to an individual who has done something important for them. They take time to think of whom to write to, what to write about, and how to send the letter. The experience of planning helps them familiarize themselves with future tasks such as research interviews.

Language Skills

Students recognize the importance of having specific readers in mind by writing a letter to a person whom they choose. When recording the gratitude visit on the worksheet, they explore how their personal experiences can be written in English. By doing so, they learn how to fit their episode into an appropriate style so that readers can share the context.

Communication Skills

Students develop interpersonal skills by explaining that the visit is part of a class assignment and by conveying a message of thanks to the receiver of the letter. If they plan to study abroad, this experience promotes awareness for upcoming situations such as thanking local teachers and homestay families in English.

Reflection Opportunities

Most students, especially those celebrating their “coming of age” (i.e., turning 20), find it timely to reflect on their past. They have the chance to observe the emotional response of the receiver when the letter is handed over or read aloud. They contemplate the level of care they have received from their parents and friends over the years.

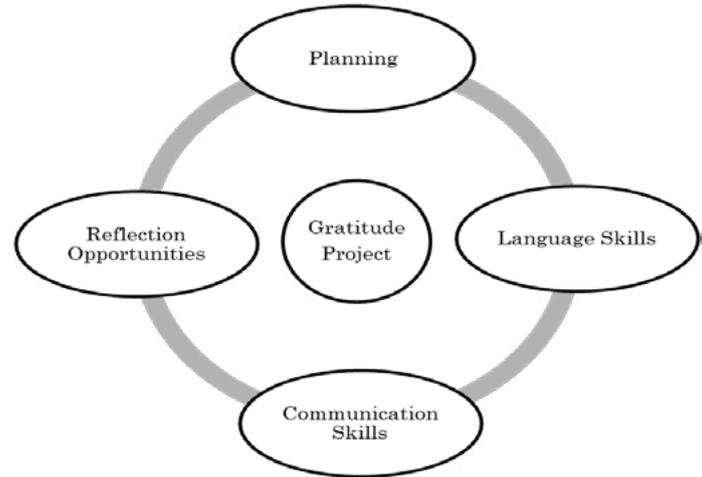


Figure 1. Four learning areas of the gratitude project.

Procedure

This section introduces the background of a class in which the gratitude project was conducted during the final 4 weeks of the autumn semester of 2013. A total of 22 second-year Japanese students (10 males and 12 females) in a compulsory basic English writing class participated in the project. The class met once a week between April 2013 and January 2014.

Writing and Reading

In the first week of December, I distributed Worksheet 1 (Plan for Expressing Gratitude; see Appendix A) and Worksheet 2 (Report on Expressing Gratitude; see Appendix B). These worksheets were designed to guide the students through the process and to help them reflect on their achievement.

As for Worksheet 1, the aim and procedure of this project was first explained in class, and the list of useful English expressions at the end of the worksheet was reviewed. This covered expressions ranging from the most commonly used (Thank you for. . .) to more formal phrases (I am deeply honored to be invited to. . .).

Next, by reading the following questions and answering them on Worksheet 1, the students planned their individual out-of-class gratitude projects.

1. Whom would you like to express gratitude to?
2. What are you grateful for? Write out what you would like to tell that person.
3. When do you plan to write the letter?
4. When will you deliver the letter to the person?
5. What do you think his/her reaction will be? Please try to answer in English.

Students were allowed to select any person that they felt they had not properly expressed thanks to. The target of the project could be anyone other than the teacher of the course, a current teacher, or other university staff. The reason for excluding this group was that the students were encouraged to connect more with people who had cared for them personally, such as parents or close friends, rather than academics who would try to respond in an encouraging and professional manner. Students were instructed to make an appointment with the receiver of the letter, explaining that they needed an interviewee for their class assignment.

As for Worksheet 1 and the letter itself, students were allowed to use their native language or English because their primary aim at this stage was to meet the interviewee and directly convey their message of thanks. The format of the letter was open, and there was no obligation for the writer to disclose its contents to the teacher or other students. If they were unable to read the letter out loud to the receiver of the letter, they could send it and record their reasons for doing so on Worksheet 2.

Reporting

Worksheet 2 functioned in four ways: as a simulation of how the interview would take place, as a log of the project the student had planned, as a record of the receiver's response, and as a reflection in English.

As a log of the projects planned in Worksheet 1, students chose answers from the options for Questions 1 to 4 on Worksheet 2, which outlined their projects.

1. Did you have a chance to express gratitude directly by reading the letter out loud to the person?
2. Whom did you write the letter to?
3. When did you read the letter out loud?
4. What was the reaction of the person who got your letter?

Next, students were encouraged to describe in their own words the reaction of the receiver of the letter in Question 5.

5. Describe more specifically the reaction of the person who got your letter in Question 4.

In Question 6, students chose from pre-determined possible answers.

6. How did you feel after you read the letter to the receiver?

Answer choices for Questions 4 and 6 were designed to review the use of adjectives in the form of past participles, such as *astonished*, *surprised*, and *disappointed*. As some students tended to confuse present participles in active and passive forms in their previous writing for the course, this was a chance to remind them when to use the past participle.

Finally, students had a chance to reflect on their emotions and the assignment. They were asked to answer Questions 7 and 8 in

English because these two questions were designed to have them practice English adjectives of emotion while describing their feelings.

7. In English, please write a sentence about how you felt about your answer to Question 6. Include one adjective you circled in Question 6.
8. Please write what you learned about thanking people. Write three sentences in English.

For Question 9, they were allowed to write comments in English or Japanese so as to have more freedom to express their thoughts.

9. Write your comments about this assignment.

Students' Reactions

In the first week of January, students handed in Worksheet 2 as a record of their gratitude visit, and their responses were collected and analyzed. Twenty students handed in reports. Eighteen students answered Question 1 on reading the letter out loud, indicating that 15 of them did so, but three did not. Eleven students wrote to their friends, five to their mothers, and three to others (Question 2). As to when the letter was read to the recipient (Question 3), 10 did so during the winter holidays, four did it after class, two on the weekend, and one during lunchtime on campus. Regarding the reactions of the people who received the letters (Question 4), eight students answered that they were “astonished,” nine chose “fairly surprised,” one selected “calm,” and one did not answer.

In response to Question 5 regarding the receivers' reactions upon hearing (or reading) the letter, one student wrote that her mother hugged her after she read the letter out loud. Another wrote that his friend was not expecting to have a letter read to him and looked surprised. On how students felt after they read the letter, 19 students chose either “very happy” or “quite happy” for their answers (Question 6).

In response to Question 7, asking students to describe in a sentence how they felt after reading the letter to the receiver, answers were mainly positive. The use of the adjectives in Question 6 resulted in 10 choices of “very happy,” 3 of “quite happy,” 1 of “happy,” and 1 of “calm.” Seven other words that were not listed in Question 6 were also used to describe students' mixed feelings, namely, “fortunate,” “shy,” “nervous,” “embarrassed,” and “shameful.” Although some students felt nervous or shy about reading their letters aloud, the receivers' positive reactions rippled back to the students, and they tended to choose the word “happy” to describe their own emotions.

For Question 8, students wrote about what they had learned about thanking people. Below are some examples of their responses.

- I thought thanking someone is very important.
- Gratitude is very important in our life.
- Friends are very precious.
- . . . my mother and I strengthened our family ties. So this report is very good.
- . . . the feeling of gratitude to my friend and relation deepened more.

Finally, most students answering the open-ended Question 9 gave positive feedback in Japanese about this project. Ten students commented that this was a good opportunity for learning. Six students pointed out that they usually did not have the chance to directly express thanks to people they care about. Less positively, four students mentioned that it was embarrassing to read the letter out loud in front of the receiver.

Overall, the class made an effort to use this assignment as a chance to express gratitude to someone they cared about. Many of them mentioned the importance of showing their feelings of appreciation to people they were thankful to. Some students wrote that they were embarrassed or shy when reading aloud, as noted in the

answers to Question 9. However, by the time of the in-class written assignment in the final class in January, they all had something positive to write about.

Two interesting aspects emerged from the reports. First, 15 out of the 20 students wrote that they read the letter out loud, although the period of the project was one of the busiest of the academic year, followed by winter holidays. The students seemed to take the project more seriously than expected. For example, a student who had not participated very actively in class had said he would complete the project without fail. The class seemed to have been motivated by his utterance.

Second, many students tried to use positive adjectives such as “happy” to express their emotional reactions in regards to their experiences in their answers to Question 7. It was surprising that, according to the students’ reports, the receivers of their letters reacted positively, and that the students, influenced by these reactions, wrote positive comments about the project.

Limitations

Despite the positive responses to the project described in this paper, there were limitations to be considered. First, before planning their projects, the class needed more time to learn about the concept of gratitude and to share their views with their peers.

Second, students’ experiences could have provided the basis for more extended pieces of writing such as reports or lengthier reflections. Although they had opportunities to express their feelings using English adjectives in short sentences in Worksheet 2, followed by writing a paragraph about it as an in-class assignment, they did not have enough time to get feedback for the worksheets or to share their individual experiences with other students in class.

Finally, it may be challenging for today’s students who are more accustomed to expressing their feelings with picture icons and incomplete sentences to deliver handwritten letters. Unexplored areas

of research include the comparison of the impact of the different forms of the gratitude letters (e.g., emails, handwritten letters, typed letters, or video letters), and the accuracy of the emotion measurement method for letter writing activities.

Bio Data

Naoko Harada teaches English writing and grammar at Kyorin University. Her research interests include EFL materials, learner development, and global education.

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Appendix A

Worksheet 1

Students may keep this sheet for planning. 手元用

Planning for Expressing Gratitude

- Write a short letter to someone that you have wanted to thank. (Exclude teachers because you will have chances at the time of graduation.) 感謝の意を表したいと思っている人に短い手紙を書く。(ただし教職員は除く。)
 - » Be specific about what you will thank them for. (ありがたく思う点を具体的に書く。)
 - » Write in the language that the receiver of the letter will understand. (相手が理解できる言語を使う。)
 - » The message can be about 5 sentences long: an address form, what you are thankful for, why you are thankful, and the closing. (本文の長さは5文程度: 呼びかけの言葉、感謝の対象、理由、結びの言葉)
 - » When you finish writing, read it aloud. (書き終えたら、一度声に出して読む。)
 - » Check your grammar and spelling errors. (文法的な誤り、誤字脱字がないことを確認する。)
- Explain that you need someone for a 5-minute interview to complete your homework. Make an appointment at a convenient time for them. 先方の予め授業の宿題に5分ほど協力してもらえると有難い旨を説明し、都合の良い時を伺っておく。
- When you meet the receiver of the letter, read it aloud if you can. 実際に対面した時に、できれば手紙を声に出して読む。
- Hand the letter to the receiver and say “thank you.” 先方にその手紙を渡し、実験に協力してもらったことを感謝する。

Aims of this experiment:

- To appreciate the power of **gratitude* by ****writing a letter to someone you want to express thanks to.** (御礼を伝えたい人に手紙を書くことで感謝の持つ力を実感するため)
- To learn how to express your positive feelings to other people by writing and reading. (読み書きを通して肯定的な気持ちを他人に伝える方法を学ぶため)
- To find out how you will feel when the receiver reacts to your message. (あなたのメッセージを相手が受け取った時に、自分がどう受け止めるかを知るため)

**According to APA Dictionary of psychology, gratitude is “a sense of thankfulness and happiness in response to receiving a gift, either a tangible benefit (e.g., a present or favor) given by someone or a fortunate happenstance (e.g., a beautiful day) (p. 418).”*

****Introducing this activity in his book, Ben-Shahar (2010) remarks that expressing gratitude to others is one of the most effective ways of raising levels of well-being (p. 81). It is a good opportunity to start thinking about who have supported you for the last three years including your family and friends.**

☆以下の質問に答えて下さい。Q 1-Q 4 は日本語でも英語でも可。Q 5 は試験の時までに英語で書けるようにしましょう。

- Q1. Whom would you like to express gratitude to? (誰に感謝の意を表したいですか。)
- _____
- Q2. What are you grateful for? Write out what you would like to tell that person. (何に対して感謝していますか。どんなことを対象者に伝えたいかを書いてください。)
- _____
- Q3. When do you plan to you write the letter? (いつ書く予定ですか。)
- _____

Q4. When will you deliver the letter to the person? (いつ手紙を渡しますか。)

Q5. What do you think his/her reaction will be? (聞き手はどんな反応を示すと思いますか。)

Please try to answer in English using one or more of the following adjectives. (以下の形容詞を1つ以上使い、英語で書いてみてください。)

surprised, show some interest, indifferent, happy, unhappy, others ()

Here are some **useful expressions when you thank someone in English.**

Thank you for ...	I will never forget your...
I am thankful for...	I could not have done ... without you.
I am grateful for...	I would like to express my appreciation for/that...
I greatly appreciate that ...	I am deeply honored to be invited to...
I am delighted that ...	I will always remember the good times we had together... (友人・家族など)
I truly enjoyed that...	I can never thank you enough.

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Appendix B Worksheet 2

Please hand in this sheet to your teacher after giving the letter. 提出用

Report on Expressing Gratitude

- Did you have a chance to express gratitude directly by **reading** the letter out loud to the person? (御礼を伝えたい人に対して手紙の内容を声に出して読んで感謝の意を表すことができましたか。)

(a) Yes. (b) No. (c) others (reason:)
 - Whom did you write the letter to? (手紙は誰に宛てて書きましたか。)

(a) a friend (b) a junior (*kohai*) (c) mother
(d) father (e) grandmother (f) grandfather
(g) other ()
 - When did you read the letter out loud? (いつ頃声に出して読みましたか。)

(a) at lunchtime (b) after classes (c) on the weekend
(d) during the long holidays (e) other ()
 - What was the reaction of the person who got your letter? (聞き手の反応はいかがでしたか。)

(a) astonished (b) fairly surprised (c) calm
(d) no interest (e) angry (f) other ()
 - Describe more specifically the reaction of the person who got your letter in Question 4. (質問4について聞き手の反応を具体的に書いてください。)
- _____

6. How did you feel after you read the letter to the receiver? (手紙を読んだ後の自分の反応はどうでしたか。)
- (a) very happy (b) quite happy (c) calm
(d) quite disappointed (e) very disappointed
(f) other ()
7. **In English, please write a sentence about how you felt about your answer to Question 6.** Include one adjective you circled in Question 6. (質問6について自分の気持ちを英文にしてみてください。上記で解答した形容詞を使うこと。)
-
8. **Please write what you learned about thanking people. Write three sentences in English.** If you failed to send the message by reading your letter, please try to think why you couldn't and explain it. (他人への感謝について学習したことを英文3文で書いてください。万一手紙を朗読できなかった場合、どうしてそうなったのかを考え、理由を書いてください。)
-
9. **Write your comments about this assignment.** It will be helpful for the teacher to prepare future lessons. (この課題に対するコメントを自由に書いてください。今後の参考にさせていただきます。)
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Note. Questions 7 and 8 are designed to reflect on your emotions. Question 9 is about what you thought about this assignment. Write your answers in full sentences.