



CHAPTER 3

GRATITUDE JOURNAL AS A TOOL FOR ENHANCING WRITING SKILLS IN BASIC ENGLISH LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the impact of gratitude on focus and resilience in university students learning English as a second language through the use of a gratitude journal. Data were collected from 23 basic English students at Universidad Veracruzana, Mexico, over the course of one semester. Participants maintained a gratitude journal in English, beginning with simple sentences and gradually progressing to longer entries. They also completed a questionnaire assessing their focus and resilience. A control group of students who did not engage in journaling completed the same questionnaire for comparison. Findings indicate that incorporating gratitude journaling supports improved focus, enhanced writing skills, and greater emotional resilience during language learning. These results suggest that gratitude interventions can be a valuable addition to ESL instruction, fostering both academic and emotional development. In today's educational context, teaching English as a second language requires innovative strategies that address not only cognitive but emotional aspects of learning. Incorporating positive psychology practices, such as gratitude journaling, offers a practical approach to deepen students' personal connection with the material and increase their motivation. This study highlights the benefits of integrating such techniques into language education to promote more engaging and effective learning experiences.

KEYWORDS: gratitude, journal, positive psychology, English, learning, teaching languages.

RESUMEN: Este estudio analiza el impacto de la gratitud en la concentración y la resiliencia de estudiantes universitarios que aprenden inglés como segunda lengua, a través del uso de un diario de gratitud. La investigación se realizó con 23 estudiantes de nivel básico de inglés en la Universidad Veracruzana, México, durante un semestre. Los participantes registraron en su diario frases en inglés, comenzando con oraciones simples y avanzando hacia entradas más extensas. Además, completaron un cuestionario para evaluar su concentración y resiliencia. Un grupo control, sin práctica de diario, también respondió el cuestionario para comparación. Los resultados evidencian que el uso del diario de gratitud favorece una mejor concentración, el desarrollo de habilidades de escritura y una mayor resiliencia emocional durante el aprendizaje del idioma. Estos hallazgos sugieren que la incorporación de intervenciones basadas en la gratitud puede ser un valioso recurso en la enseñanza del inglés como segunda lengua, promoviendo tanto el desarrollo académico como el emocional. En el contexto educativo actual, donde es fundamental abordar aspectos cognitivos y emocionales, integrar prácticas de psicología positiva como el diario de gratitud ofrece una estrategia innovadora para fortalecer la motivación y el vínculo personal de los estudiantes con el aprendizaje, contribuyendo a experiencias educativas más efectivas y significativas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Gratitud, diario, psicología positiva, inglés, aprendizaje, enseñanza de lenguas.

INTRODUCTION

The present study aimed to evaluate the impact of gratitude on focus and resilience in university students' classroom learning through the practice of maintaining a gratitude journal. Data were collected from 23 basic English students at Universidad Veracruzana, Mexico, over the course of one semester while learning English as a second language (ESL).

Throughout this period, students wrote in a gratitude journal in English, initially using simple and short sentences and gradually progressing to longer, more complex written entries. Passing a final examination was a requisite for continuing their academic studies. Central to this investigation is the importance of written production in language learning. Writing regularly, especially on personally relevant topics such as gratitude, fosters not only language proficiency but also the development of positive writing habits — a critical factor for sustained academic success. Structured writing practice contributes to internalizing vocabulary, improving syntax, and enhancing overall communicative competence in English.

Moreover, the practice of gratitude journaling offers significant emotional and cognitive benefits. Gratitude enhances students' emotional resilience, enabling them to maintain motivation and focus amidst the challenges of acquiring a new

language. By reflecting daily on positive experiences and personal growth, students cultivate a mindset that supports persistence, reduces anxiety, and enriches their learning process.

The findings from this study provide valuable insights into how integrating gratitude-based writing activities can enhance focus, writing skills, and emotional engagement, contributing to a holistic and effective ESL learning experience.

In today's educational context, teaching ESL to university students demands innovative methodologies that address both cognitive and affective dimensions of learning. Many learners face difficulties acquiring vocabulary and grammatical structures due to a lack of personal connection with the content, which undermines motivation and progress. Aligning written production tasks with students' real-life experiences and needs promotes deeper engagement and fosters meaningful language use.

To address these challenges, educators increasingly adopt interdisciplinary approaches, including positive psychology, to enrich language instruction. At the Centro de Idiomas, Universidad Veracruzana, the gratitude journal has been employed for three years as a simple yet powerful daily practice. This technique encourages learners to write reflectively about their lives, reinforcing positive emotions and facilitating authentic written communication. The cultivation of gratitude through writing thus supports both linguistic development and emotional well-being, establishing positive habits that benefit students beyond the classroom.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To evaluate how writing a gratitude journal can help students improve their writing skill.
- To examine the relationship between practicing gratitude and classroom learning at the university level.
- Identify the impact of gratitude journal as a tool to improve Student's way of writing in English

The integration of gratitude journals in language teaching at Universidad Veracruzana draws upon the principles of positive psychology, as outlined by Emmons and McCullough, as well as insights from second language acquisition experts such as Eisenstein and Bodman (1986, 1993). These scholars highlight that expressing gratitude can be particularly challenging for second language learners due to factors such as linguistic limitations, cultural differences, and a lack of established learning habits. Observations at Universidad Veracruzana confirm these challenges among students, emphasizing the need for supportive strategies that nurture both language development and emotional well-being.

Previous studies on gratitude in language learning have explored various dimensions, including written and oral production, academic achievement, and socio-emotional factors. However, the present research focuses specifically on the acquisition of writing skills and the potential role of gratitude journaling in enhancing written expression. The study requires questionnaires and final exam writing samples, randomly selected from participating students, to analyze the impact of this practice.

Positive psychology, as described by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2014), emphasizes the cultivation of strengths and virtues that contribute to a meaningful and fulfilling life. This perspective aligns with global health initiatives, such as those advocated by the United Nations and the World Health Organization, which recognize psychological well-being as a critical component of overall health. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) further identifies gratitude as a “super skill,” essential for fostering emotional well-being, self-knowledge, and resilience. Gratitude is closely linked to mental health, life satisfaction, optimism, self-esteem, social relationships, and long-term happiness.

By examining the use of gratitude journals in the context of English language learning, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how emotional and psychological strategies can support academic achievement and personal growth among university students.

THE SCIENCE OF GRATITUDE

The science of gratitude has gained significant prominence thanks to the pioneering work of researchers such as Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough. At the beginning of the 2000s, supported by the John Templeton Foundation (JTF), the *Expanding the Science and Practice of Gratitude Project* (ESPG) was launched, marking the beginning of a surge in rigorous research and scholarly publications on gratitude.

“Gratitude, derived from the Latin word *gratia*, meaning thankfulness or grace, has been identified as a valuable tool in various fields, including second language acquisition. Emmons and McCullough (2001) define gratitude as “a cognitive-affective state resulting from the perception of having been benefited by an external agent in a supportive, disinterested, and free manner.”

According to Watson and Naragon-Gainey (2010), gratitude exerts a protective effect against mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety. It also mitigates negative emotions stemming from social comparison, reducing feelings of envy and resentment (Emmons & Mishra, 2011). As a personal strength, gratitude correlates positively with self-esteem and life satisfaction. Alongside the ability to appreciate, perceive, and savor life experiences, gratitude is considered a key determinant of overall well-being (Martínez, 2006).

McCullough et al. (2002) describe three primary functions of gratitude:

- I **Social Barometer:** It helps individuals recognize when others are willing to offer selfless support.
- I **Motivator:** Observing benevolent actions inspires reciprocal kindness and fosters a chain of gratitude.
- I **Reinforcer:** Expressing thanks generates positive emotions that encourage continued prosocial behavior

The power of gratitude, combined with a commitment to noticing the good around us, promotes numerous health benefits, including enhanced well-being, happiness, and positive affect. It also serves as a buffer against negative emotions (Emmons & Stern, 2013). Research shows that gratitude can alleviate symptoms of depression (Seligman et al., 2005) and is closely linked to optimism, joy, and enthusiasm (Watkins, Cruz, Holben, & Kolts, 2008). Thus, gratitude plays a crucial role in fostering personal life satisfaction.

In recent years, several studies have explored the benefits of gratitude within educational contexts, emphasizing the interactions between students and teachers (Howells, 2014). Contributions from scholars such as Emmons and McCullough (2003), Froh, Sefick, and Emmons (2008), and Froh, Kashdan et al. (2009) have further enriched this field.

A study by Park et al. (2004) examining the relationship between various character strengths and life satisfaction found a strong, consistent correlation between gratitude and other positive traits such as enthusiasm, hope, love, and curiosity. Conversely, traits like creativity, judgement, and love of learning showed weaker associations. Nonetheless, the presence of love of learning remains a significant aspect of students' recognition and appreciation of their educational experiences.

METHODOLOGY

This study involved 23 students from the General Basic Training Area (AFBG) at Universidad Veracruzana. The participants come from various academic disciplines and are all enrolled in basic-level English courses (A1 and A2). This group was assigned to maintain a gratitude journal in English throughout the semester.

PROCEDURE

Students in the gratitude journal group were instructed to write a sentence expressing gratitude in English on each school day from Monday to Thursday during the academic term. At the end of the semester, students shared their gratitude journals with their instructor to be reviewed.

The instructions given to the students were as follows:

- a. Write a sentence in English expressing gratitude for something specific.
- b. Maintain the gratitude journal from Monday to Thursday (class days).
- c. Bring a sentence or thought about gratitude to the professor so she can check it.
- d. Review corrections provided by your professor.
- e. Make additional corrections if necessary.

RATIONALE

Previous research has demonstrated that practicing gratitude offers benefits across multiple areas, including promoting a sense of calm in the present moment and fostering hope for the future when cultivated as a habit. By engaging in gratitude journaling, students are encouraged to identify positive aspects of their lives and articulate these experiences, even in the face of challenges—particularly relevant given the difficulties faced during the first semester, 2025.

The gratitude journal encourages students to focus on positive aspects of their lives, temporarily setting aside their problems. Although commercial gratitude journals are widely available today, students were not required to purchase any materials. Instead, participation was facilitated by asking them to write on their notebooks, rather on their digital devices.

Maintaining a gratitude journal requires only about five minutes of daily attention. However, when writing in a second language, this process demands more time and cognitive effort. Students must reflect on their gratitude, compose their sentences in English, consult dictionaries if needed, review and correct their entries

Research has shown that regularly practicing gratitude offers numerous physical and mental health benefits. By focusing on positive elements in life, individuals

- Reduce negative emotions linked to depression,
 - Gain self-confidence,
 - Improve overall health,
 - Develop greater self-awareness,
 - Eliminate self-pity,
 - Reduce stress and anxiety,
 - Foster empathy by being perceived as kind and approachable, and
 - Experience better sleep quality.
- Moreover, gratitude practice is completely free!

GRATITUDE AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Gratitude also positively influences academic performance in significant ways. García (2015) conducted a comprehensive study involving 145 students to investigate the relationship between experiencing gratitude and second language learning outcomes. The study revealed that gratitude plays a crucial role not only in enhancing interpersonal relationships—such as cooperation and communication with peers and instructors—but also in fostering intrapersonal development, including emotional regulation, motivation, and self-efficacy. These interpersonal and intrapersonal improvements create a supportive and resilient learning environment, which is essential for successful language acquisition. Furthermore, the findings suggest that students who cultivate gratitude tend to exhibit higher levels of engagement and persistence in language learning tasks, ultimately leading to better academic performance. This underlines the importance of integrating gratitude-promoting activities into language education programs as a means of supporting both the emotional well-being and the cognitive advancement of learners.

A SUPER SKILL

Developing gratitude as a “super skill” requires discipline, perseverance, and the consistent habit of journaling. Although forming this habit can be challenging initially, students are motivated by the collective participation of their peers, especially when journals are submitted daily to the teacher. This shared practice encourages students to express positive experiences, gradually improve their writing, and internalize the habit of gratitude. Over time, this positive mindset spreads throughout the group, motivating not only students but also the teacher.

Noticing the positive aspects of life is often difficult, as people tend to focus more on problems, complaints, and criticism. However, grateful individuals tend to be happier, healthier, and more resilient, overcoming stress and improving both physical and emotional well-being.

Student recognition of the teaching-learning process is not instantaneous; it requires time and reflection. Acknowledging the contributions of others in the construction of knowledge involves a degree of humanism and respect for both others’ and one’s own input.

Research by García-Ramírez (2013) and others (Goleman, 2006; Fiorini & García-Ramírez, 2013) has demonstrated a strong connection between gratitude, emotional intelligence, and academic success. These findings underscore the importance of gratitude in education, as it relates to the emotions and attitudes of both students and teachers.

Cultivating Gratitude in Education



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GRATITUDE AND SOCIALIZATION

Socialization plays a fundamental and multifaceted role in language acquisition, encompassing interactions and influences from a broad array of agents such as teachers, peers, technology, media, social networks, family members, and the wider community. This complex social environment shapes not only linguistic competence but also learners' attitudes, motivation, and emotional engagement. Within this context, gratitude emerges as a powerful positive emotion that significantly enhances the learning experience. Gratitude fosters identification with others, deeper understanding, and meaningful discovery during both individual and collective learning processes. It contributes to creating a supportive atmosphere in which students recognize and appreciate the pivotal role of their teachers as facilitators and co-constructors of knowledge.

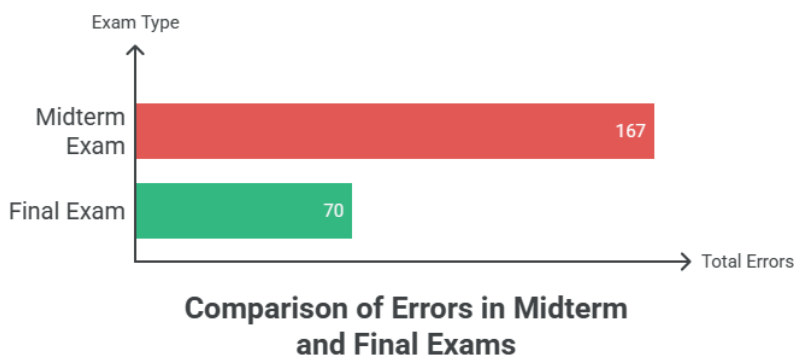
The cultivation of gratitude is therefore a crucial element for achieving success in second language instruction. When intentionally nurtured in the classroom, gratitude encourages students to acknowledge and value their active participation, effort, and progress, as well as the dedication of their instructors. This emotional and relational dimension enriches the learning environment, promoting greater engagement, resilience, and academic growth. The current study offers empirical evidence from the implementation of a gratitude journal in basic English courses at Universidad Veracruzana, Mexico, illustrating how deliberate incorporation of gratitude practices can strengthen social bonds and enhance both the cognitive and affective facets of language learning.

RESULTS

This time, the group that completed the Gratitude Journal showed very promising academic results. We would like to share some of these outcomes, but first, we want to highlight a few extraordinary observations.

Firstly, the students made a significant effort to write and practice English, particularly using past tense in contexts different from those requested in the final exam. The final exam scenario did not align with the program's syllabus or the students' regular practice throughout the semester, which was a source of concern for the supervising teacher. Additionally, some students missed the last few days due to commitments for other projects and courses. Nevertheless, the majority continued writing in their Gratitude Journals consistently.

Regarding the results, we observed notable improvements: In the midterm exam, 22 students collectively made 167 errors. For the final exam, 23 students participated and made a total of 70 errors. It is important to mention that the final exam demanded a type of writing that differed from what was practiced during the semester, which could have influenced the error count in the writing section. However, none of the students expressed any complaints. They completed the exam successfully, and remarkably, made very few errors in the written production section.

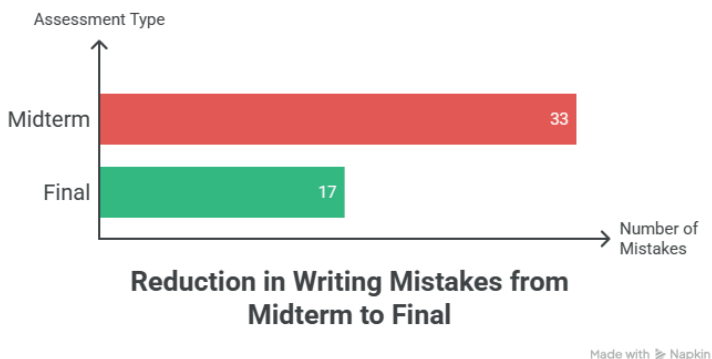


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We also tracked the number of sentences each student wrote to complete the task required in the written exam. Overall, students' writing production showed slight improvement by the end of the English course. It is worth noting that students began writing the Gratitude Journal from the second week of classes, meaning they had already started practicing English writing by the time of the midterm exam. Most students met the exam criteria and wrote enough to pass.

During the final exam, students managed to write slightly more than they did in the midterm exam. Specifically, the total written output increased from 184 sentences in the midterm to 196 sentences in the final exam. It is worth noting that one student was unable to complete the task due to time constraints; nonetheless, overall written production still showed a noticeable increase. Although the improvement is not dramatic, it is important to highlight this positive trend, as reflected in the previous graph.

A crucial section for our study is the writing component of the final exam. In this section, the students' errors were carefully recorded and subsequently compared to the errors they made during the midterm exam. The analysis of these data yielded the following results:



In conclusion, the implementation of the Gratitude Journal demonstrated a positive impact on students' English writing performance and academic engagement. Despite challenges such as mismatched exam scenarios and occasional student absences, most participants maintained consistent writing practice throughout the semester. The notable reduction in errors from the midterm to the final exam, alongside the increased written output, indicates genuine progress in language accuracy and production. Although the final exam required unfamiliar contexts, students adapted effectively with minimal complaints and strong performance. These outcomes underscore the value of integrating reflective and meaningful writing activities, such as gratitude journaling, in ESL instruction to foster improved writing skills, sustained motivation, and enhanced focus. Continued use of such practices holds promise for supporting language development and academic success among university learners.

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