

Classroom Blogs: Enhancing the Language Development of Young Students

A Thesis

Presented to

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Heritage University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of

Master of Arts in English Language and Literature

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2013

FACULTY APPROVAL

Classroom Blogs: Enhancing the Language Development of Young Students

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Abstract

Teachers are consistently trying to find new and innovative ways to engage their pupils. Teachers have started to replace reading logs (in writing journals) with reading blogs (computer based). Reading blogs can be found on a classroom website or specific blogspot on the internet. The students use the reading blogs to talk about the books they are reading and answer specific questions given by their teachers. While these blogs have started to become popular there is not a vast amount of research to support their use. The purpose of the study was to provide research based evidence supporting the idea that using classroom blogs would enhance the language development of young people. A group of fifteen 5th grade students were chosen to participate in the case study. These students were enrolled in the Toppenish School District TAG program. Students would read articles provided by the teacher and were given a question which they were to respond to on their classroom website. The data analyzed were the students' responses to the questions and the responses to their peers' posts. What was specifically analyzed was the amount of words written for each response, the number of grammatical errors for each response, the amount of responses to each question, and the overall perception of the students. The hypothesis was that over time the students' responses would increase and the number of errors would decrease. However, the research did not support the hypothesis of the study; many factors contributed to the results.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the use of classroom blogs and classroom websites as used by teachers to enhance instruction and student engagement in the specific content area of English/Language Arts. Young people are surrounded by all different types of technology in their homes and at school. Having computer skills is just as much a necessity for children of the 21st century as being able to read and write. The best part for teaching about teaching students computer skills is that students actually enjoy using the computers to learn and play. Teachers are constantly trying to find ways to integrate technology into instruction. Using classroom blogs and classroom websites are some of the new technological resources which teachers have been implementing into their classroom instruction. Teachers use this technology in different ways and for different purposes. Some teachers use the classroom website to communicate classroom information with parents and students. Other teachers use a classroom website as an extension of the classroom, a place where students can go and respond to specific information given by the teacher and a place where students can further their understanding about the content material they are learning, it is in this area which this study wanted to focus.

There are not enough hours in the school day to teach to every specific individual in the classroom and this is where having a classroom website can be an extremely useful tool for teachers to reach students and support them no matter what their academic level or needs. Because classroom websites are relatively new, there is little research about their effectiveness. The purpose of this study was focused specifically on how teachers use classroom blogs to enhance the discussion of the content being taught. When teachers have students keep a reading log (which is usually a type of journal used by students in their classroom to record what they have been reading) typically the only people who will read that child's response are the child and

the teacher. When a teacher uses a classroom website for reading blogs, typically the students will create posts about what they are reading and all of their peers can read them and respond to what was written. Because the students' responses are read by their peers one would naturally believe the students would edit and revise their responses to avoid criticism from their peers. If that statement was true than students would more than likely increase their language skills more rapidly than if they were to use a reading log system for recording their ideas because only the teacher would know the errors made by the student; this studies purpose was to find out if there was any truth to that statement.

CHAPTER ONE

The way students learn, engage, and socialize has drastically changed during the past decade. These changes have been brought about by such technologies as the internet and cellphones. Students have instant access to not only their friends, but mass amounts of information. Young people ages 8 to 18 spend almost six and one-half hours a day with media (Ellison, Wu 2008). With young people spending so much time with media, it only makes sense for teachers to find a way to bring media into the classroom. One way to bring media into the classroom is by creating a classroom blog.

Teachers are struggling to keep the attention of students and are constantly trying to find new ways to engage them, in that way classroom blogs can help. Many studies have shown that students enjoy using the computer and are more invested in their learning, when using a classroom blog. Classroom blogs help shift learning from passive to active and when students are actively engaged in their learning they are able to understand the content at a deeper level.

So, why don't teachers use blogs as an extension to learning? Why do many teachers still say, I just don't have time to have the students work on computers? I believe teachers that make that kind of remark do not see computers as an amazing tool to help students create not only their own meanings, but also a way to build a community of learners. There has been research on the effectiveness of classroom blogs, but the test groups for those studies are mainly college students and some high school students. Very few studies have focused on how classroom blogs can positively affect the learning of elementary and middle school students. If more teachers would see the value of classroom blogs and how they can help middle school and elementary students not only with developing a deeper understanding of the content, but also increasing the language development of the students, teachers would be more likely to create a classroom blog.

Many different types of blogs exist. Once a teacher decides having a classroom blog would be beneficial, there are many different types of blogs teachers could create. From the research studied the most successful blogs are those that have students search for information, create posts that lead to discussion, and allow students to share their own experiences and thoughts with their teacher and peers.

CHAPTER TWO

Glewa & Gogan (2007) examined how classroom blogs will not only improve literacy skills, based on personal experience, but also improve digital fluency. Understanding that the “traditional methods of teaching literacy need to make room for digital fluency,” Glewa and Gogan created a classroom blog which would focus on building digital fluency through a literacy project titled “Surviving the Hurricane”. The blog allowed students to reflect on their own personal experiences by creating a post to the blog. Their classmates would then read the post and be allowed to comment. When students leave comments on each other’s post, an online discussion takes place. At the end of the program the students were given a post-BLOG questionnaire about the process and experiences that were gained through the classroom blog. The questionnaire revealed “Students realized an increased awareness of the impact and quality of their writing using a technology based tool” (47).

Zawilinski (2009) suggests that in order for classroom blogs to be successful they must promote higher order thinking. Zawilinski describes the four common types of classroom blogs and how a teacher can setup such blogs. There are “four recursive steps in the HOT blogging framework” according to Zawilinski (656). The first step is called “Bolster the Background” (656). This step has students build their background knowledge of the subject by having them research about a subject and then share what they have found in a reflective post. After, students write their post they are encouraged to read other students posts and then generate a comment about the post. This step is important because “the students with greater prior knowledge remember more, are better able to determine what is important in the text, and use that knowledge to draw inferences” (657). The next step in the HOT framework is “Prime the Pump”. During this step students are encouraged to create posts to further their understanding about the

text. Students might create post to clarify, write about first impressions, or create a link between the text and their own personal experiences. Students are also encouraged to generate discussion with one another. The discussion piece will hold students accountable for reading other students posts. The next step is called "Continue the Conversation". This step focuses on synthesizing the information that has been gained through the reading of the text, posts, research, and comments made by other students.

CHAPTER THREE

The use of classroom blogs as an extension of the classroom is a relatively new idea. While there have been articles written and studies conducted, there has not been a significant number of studies which have scientifically analyzed the effectiveness of classroom blogs on student learning. Many have written about how classroom blogs have engaged their students in learning, and the evidence is usually a pre/post survey given to the students about the student's thoughts and feelings about using the computer and the classroom blog as a way of extending their learning. While surveys are valuable they don't provide a lot of information about how much they actually learned or gained from using the classroom blogs.

The best way to provide evidence to support the use of classroom blogs as an extension for learning was to conduct a case study. Using a case study would introduce a scientific perspective to an idea that has been researched more through surveys and reflections, which are great resources, but do not provide adequate evidence to support the use of classroom blogs. The study consisted of a small sample group, and a control group was not used.

Case studies do not necessarily create cause/effect relationship, and there are many factors which can affect the results of the study. However, case studies are a great way to study groups of people and that is why the case study method was used to find out whether classroom blogs really do help students improve their language development.

This study followed a small group of 5th graders for a period of three months. The study group was chosen because the teacher to student ratio was relatively low and the students which were studied were part of a program called TAG, which stands for talented and gifted.

CHAPTER FOUR

Research for this study started December 2012. The principal of Kirkwood Elementary, Anastasia Sanchez, and classroom teacher Clem See were kind enough to allow the case study to be conducted with their group of students. Kirkwood Elementary is one of four elementary schools in the Toppenish School District. The district is located in the south central region of Washington State, roughly 162 miles from Seattle, Washington. As of May 2012, there were 3,626 students enrolled in the Toppenish School District.

Race/Ethnicity (October 2011)		
American Indian/Alaskan Native	462	12.7%
Asian	5	0.1%
Asian/Pacific Islander	5	0.1%
Black	2	0.1%
Hispanic	2,888	79.6%
White	238	6.6%
Two or More Races	31	0.9%
Special Programs		
Free or Reduced-Price Meals (May 2012)	3,587	98.9%
Special Education (May 2012)	470	13.0%
Transitional Bilingual (May 2012)	1,056	29.1%
Migrant (May 2012)	591	16.3%
Section 504 (May 2012)	26	0.7%
Foster Care (May 2012)	21	0.6%

Figure 1.1 Demographics of the Toppenish School District According to OSPI

The majority of the population is Hispanic at 79.6 percent, and 98.9 percent of the students receive free or reduced lunch. A large portion of the students attending the school

district are transitional bilingual, 29.1 percent. In summary the population of students which attend Toppenish School District are not only faced with economic hardships, but also with daunting task of learning two languages, Spanish and English. Despite the challenges faced by these students, they have a graduation rate of 70.1 percent for 2011, which is comparatively better than a school district with similar demographics located about 12 miles away, with a graduation rate for 2011 of only 65.9 percent. Kirkwood Elementary is the host school of the TAG program. Students from all four elementary schools are bused to Kirkwood twice a week to participate in the TAG program. The TAG teacher is Clem See, a first year teacher with a Bachelors Degree in Engineering and a Master of Arts Degree in Education. Mr. See volunteered to participate in the case study. Mr. See oversaw the study by creating the webpage used by the students and the articles used for the read and response activities.

In December 2012 students participated in a survey. The survey asked the students questions such as: how often do you use computers, do your teachers have you work on computers, what do you use the computer for, and do you think using the computer would help develop your language skills. After, the students took the survey Mr. See introduced the students to the classroom blog they would be using called Edmodo. Edmodo is a private web based site where teachers can create a place only students, the teacher, and the students' parents can visit. Once, the students were familiar with the webpage they were given their first assignment, which was to visit the website provided by Mr. See, read the article, and respond to a specific question about the article by creating a post on Edmodo. Students were not given a rubric to follow or use as a guideline for written responses, nor were students given a grade for their responses. All responses were at the discretion of the student. A total of six, read and respond activities were given to the students over the course of three months.

Every time the students created a response the date, words written, and grammar errors were noted. Once the study was complete the data were analyzed. The data analyzed included the number of words written per post and how many grammatical errors were made. The grammatical errors that were counted only consisted of errors appropriate for the age level of the students, such as: use of capital letters, use of punctuation, spelling, and use of contractions. The information analyzed was how many students participated in each read and response activity, as well as any other factors which were noticed by the teacher and researcher during the study.

CHAPTER FIVE

After analyzing the data, nine students length of words per response decreased as the program went on (Figures 2.2, 3.2, 4.2, 5.2, 8.2, 12.2, 13.2, 14.2, 16.2) , meaning the number of words per post decreased over time. The hypothesis was that the students' posts would increase over time, not decrease. However, four students did show growth in the number of words used in their response (Figures 7.2, 10.2, 11.2, 15.2, 17.2). The number of errors decreased over responses for seven of the students, but did not show a decrease for the other 8 students; which again was contrary to the hypothesis, that over time errors would decrease. For the five students which did show growth in the length of words per response, three of them did show a decrease in errors (Figures 7.1, 11.1, 17.1).

The majority of students responded to each post, but not all responded on the day the post was sent out. This could have been because the student was absent or because he or she did not have enough classroom time to complete the assignment. The average number of students which posted a response on the day it was given was 9.5 students.

The survey taken by the students at the beginning of the program showed some interesting results. All of the students believed that using the computers would increase their language skills. A majority of the students said they used the computers at least once a week, and only two of the students did not have a computer at home. When asked what they use the computer for a majority of the students answered they used the computer mostly for video games.

The figures 2.1 through 17.2 provide a look at each individual student's dates of responses, words written, the number of errors per post, and the average number of words and

errors written by the student. Figure 18.1, provides a look at how many students responded to each post on the date given. All of the student's names are anonymous, so they appear as letters.

CHAPTER SIX

After analyzing the data from the study, Mr. See and I, reflected on the results. The students experienced some technical difficulties. The computer lab was not always available for the students to complete the read and responds activity, so the student used tablets in the classroom. The tablets were not as easy for the students to use because they could not see what they had previously written, which made editing their responses somewhat difficult. Mr. See noticed the students were always enthusiastic about going to the computer lab and completing the read and respond activity. Mr. See also noticed the students' computer skills improved from when they first entered the class. The students used the computers for other activities besides the read and respond activity; they also used the computers for quizzes, math games, programming their robots, researching, and creating power points. Mr. See noticed that when the articles posted on Edmodo also had a video link to support the information they had just read, the students seemed to be more engaged in writing a response. Mr. See also mentioned that even though his group of students were TAG students there were still several behavior problems which could have contributed to the results.

The data does not support the hypothesis. While a few of the students did increase the number of words written per post and at the same time decreased the amount of grammatical errors made, the majority of the students did not show any improvement in their language development. With that being said the students did increase their computer skills. Also, because the students were not graded for this assignment, which typically students are graded for all of the work they produce, this was a true measure of what they would produce on their own.

Even though the data does not support the hypothesis, I do not believe the problem lies within the hypothesis, but in the design of the study. If the study were to be conducted again there are several ways in which the initial setup and process could and should be changed.

One change I would make in the study is that I conduct the study with my own students, under my supervision. At the time I did not have my own classroom and Mr. See was extremely nice and allowed me to conduct this study with his students in his classroom. The second aspect I would change would be to create a rubric for the students. We would cover the rubric in class, so that the students knew the expectations for their work and behavior. The third aspect I would change would be to require that all of the students respond to at least one other student's post. This process was not possible on the Edmodo site. Because the students were not able to read and respond to each other's posts they did not have the opportunity for discussion, and because of that I would also use a different website to have students respond. The fourth aspect I would change would be the length of time to conduct the study as well as the number of read and respond activities given. Mr. See's class focused on creating an understanding of engineering, exposing the students to types of technologies, and finding creative ways to explore the sciences. While reading and writing are cross curricular activities, the focus of the TAG program is not creating better writers or to develop their language skills and with that I believe having the study conducted during a Reading/Language Arts block would be better suited for the study.

The study did not support the hypothesis that using a classroom blog would enhance the language development of young students. However, as mentioned many factors can affect the results of a case study. If the study were conducted again with the changes mentioned above, I believe the data would have a different story to tell.

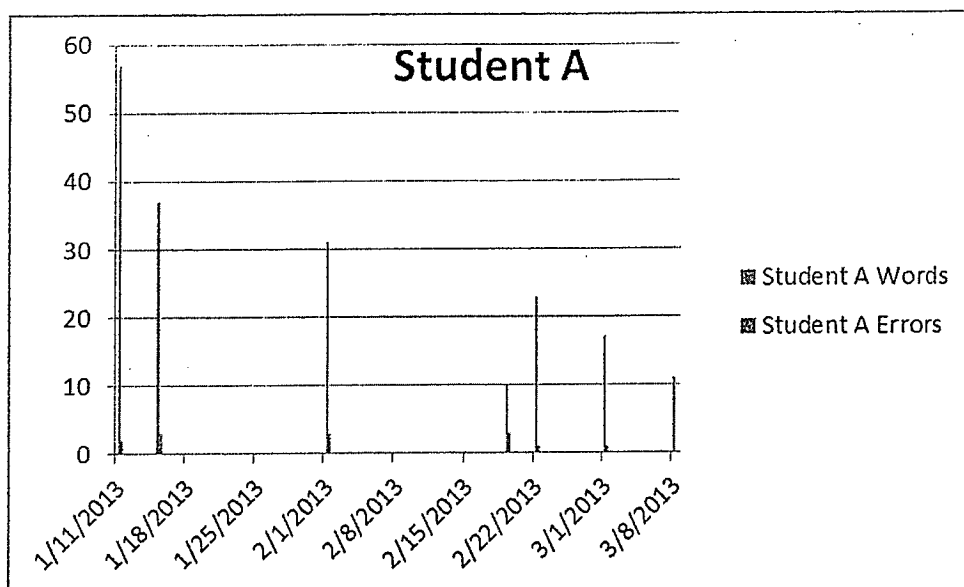


Figure 2.1 Student A's Number of Words Written and Grammatical Errors Made

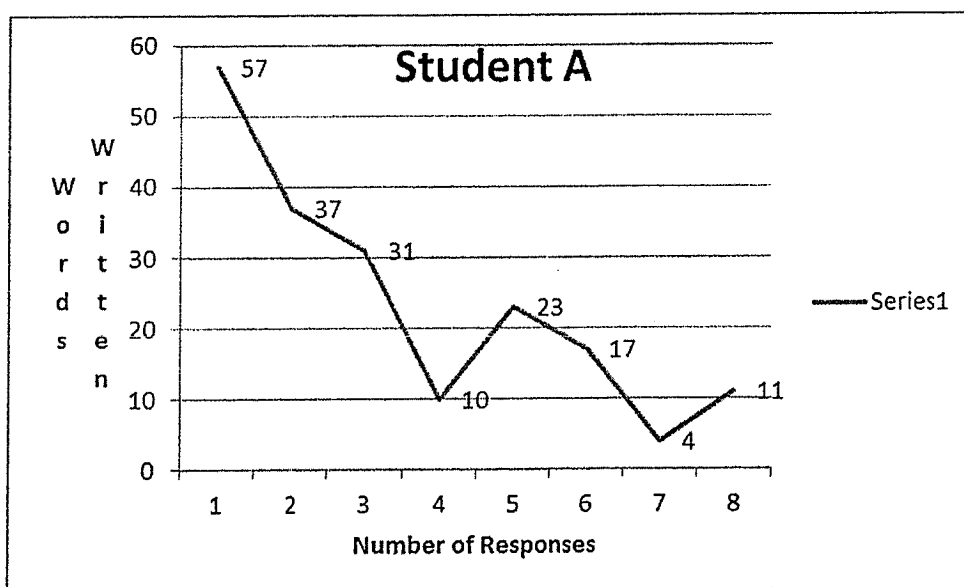


Figure 2.2 Student A's Number of Words Written Per Post

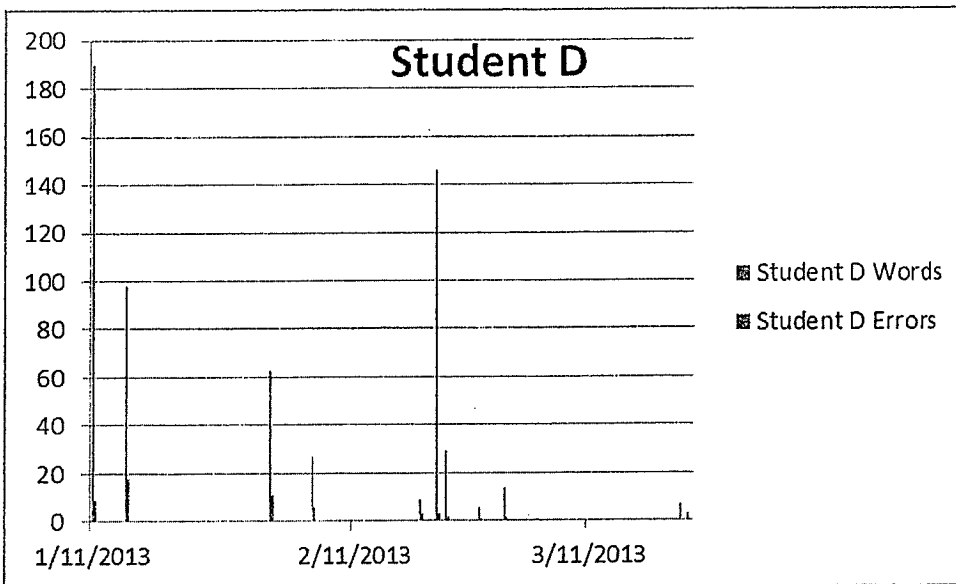


Figure 3.1 Student D's Number of Words Written and Grammatical Errors Made

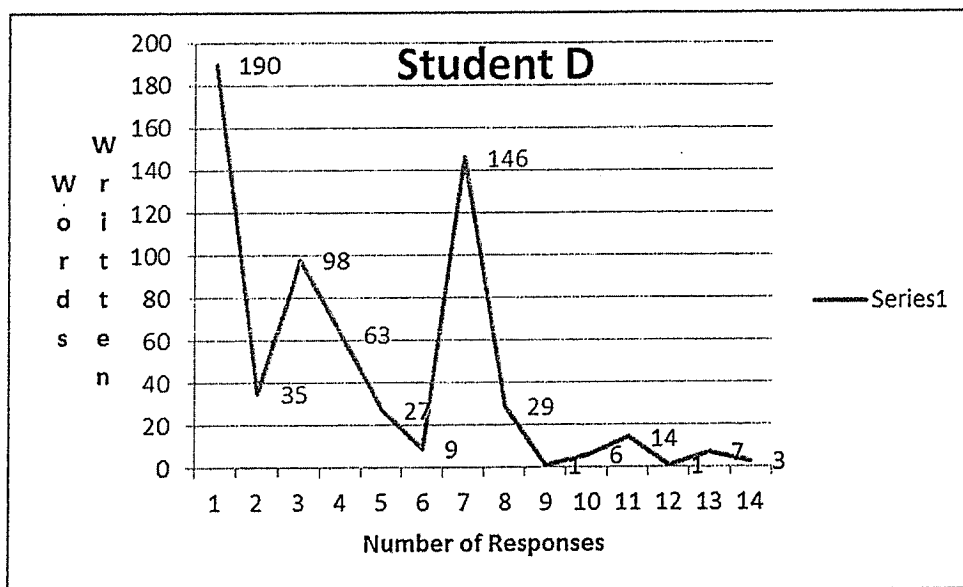


Figure 3.2 Student D's Number of Words Written Per Post

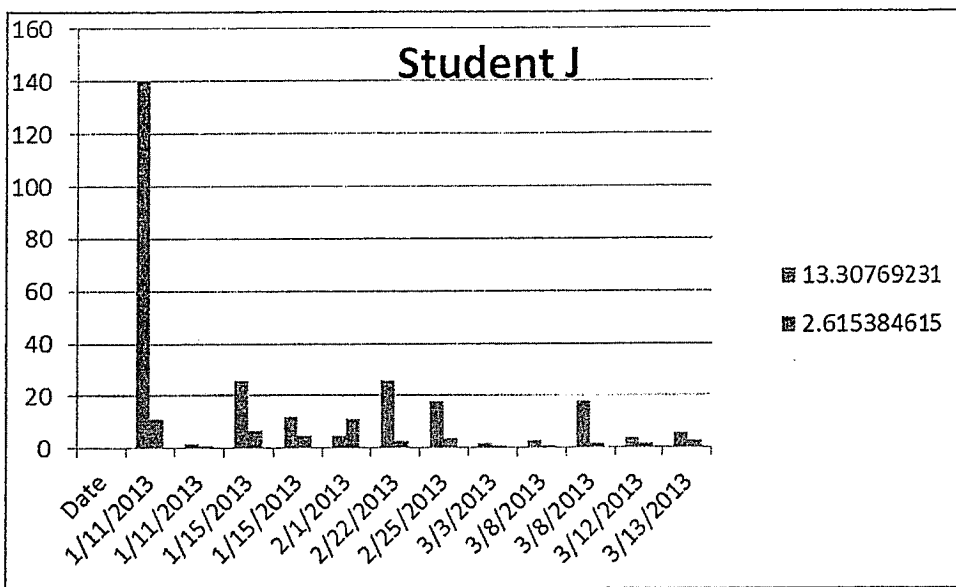


Figure 4.1 Student J's Number of Words Written and Grammatical Errors Made

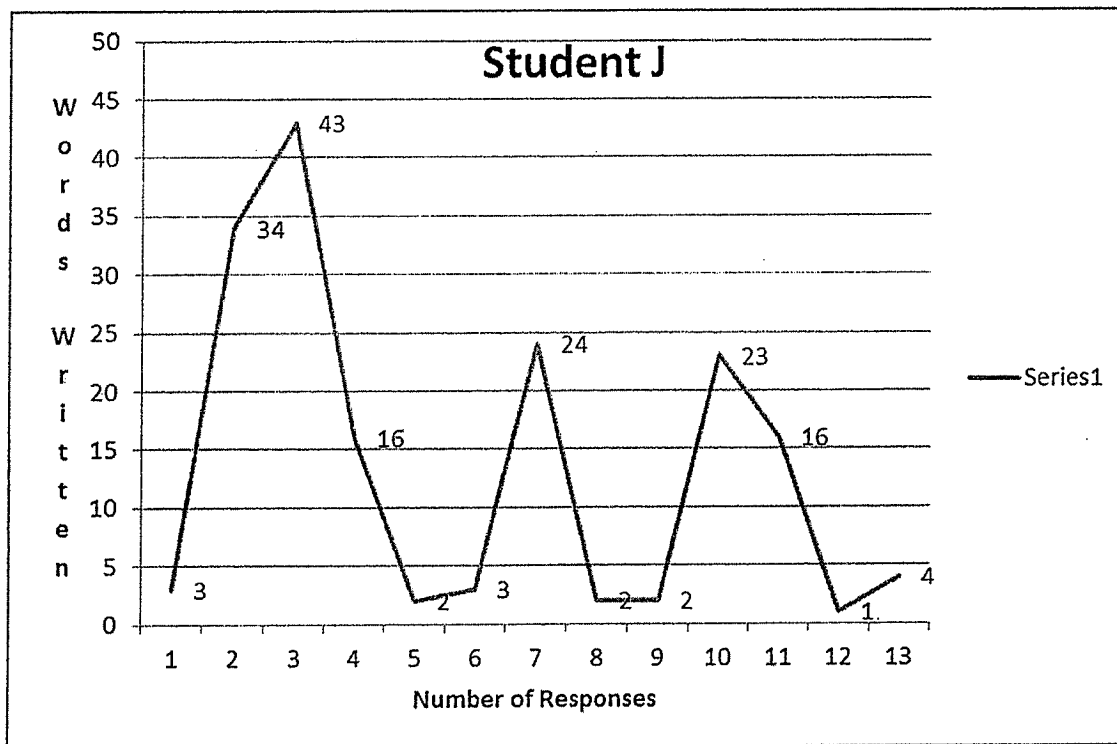


Figure 4.2 Student J's Number of Words Written Per Post

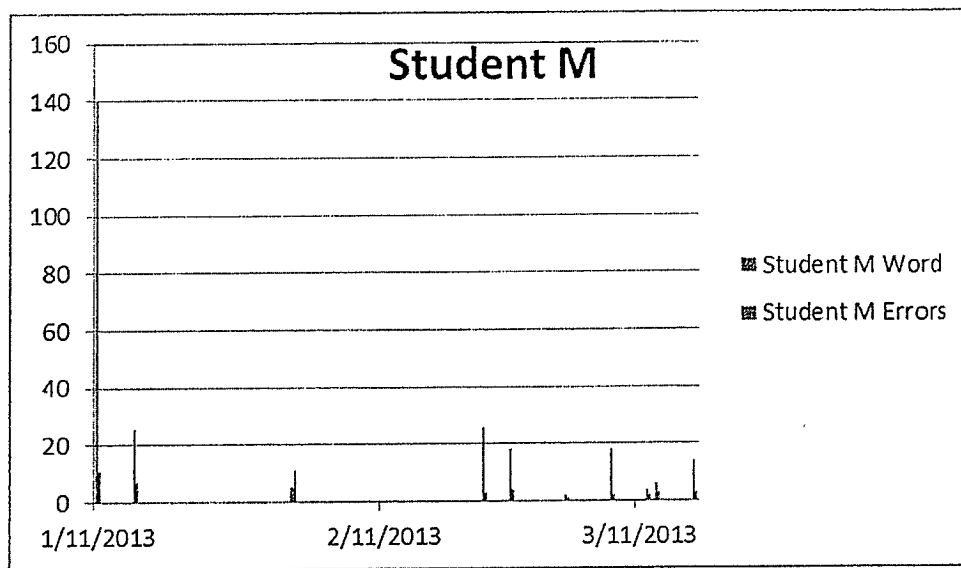


Figure 5.1 Student M's Number of Words Written and Grammatical Errors Made

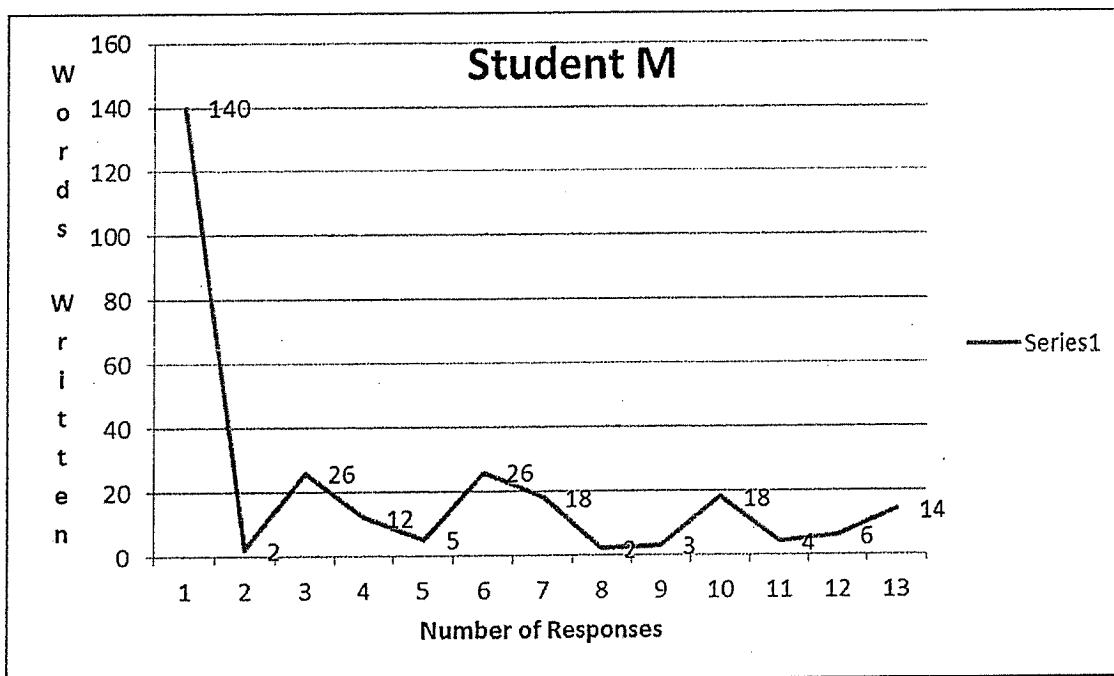


Figure 5.2 Student D's Number of Words Written Per Post

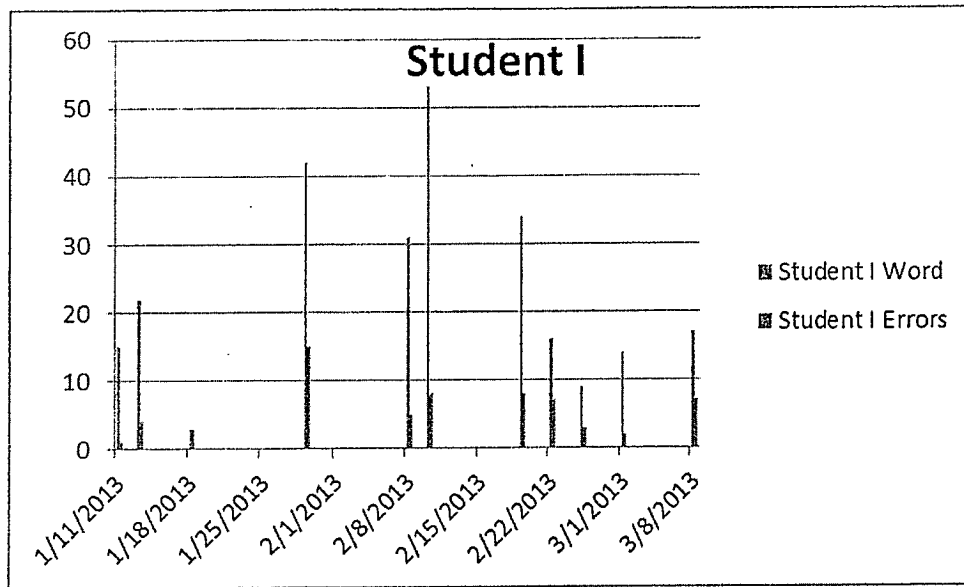


Figure 6.1 Student I's Number of Words Written and Grammatical Errors Made

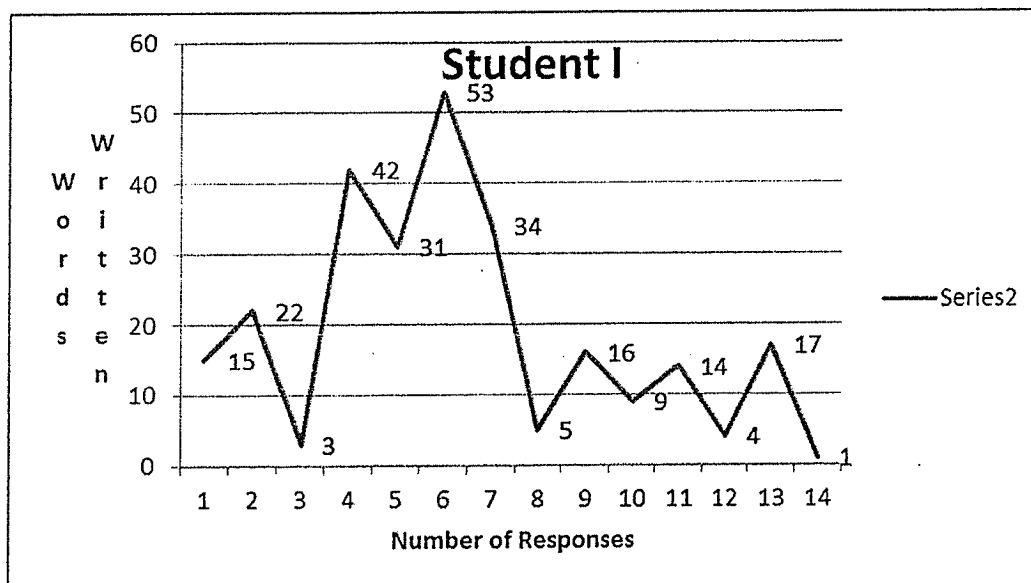


Figure 6.2 Student I's Number of Words Written Per Post

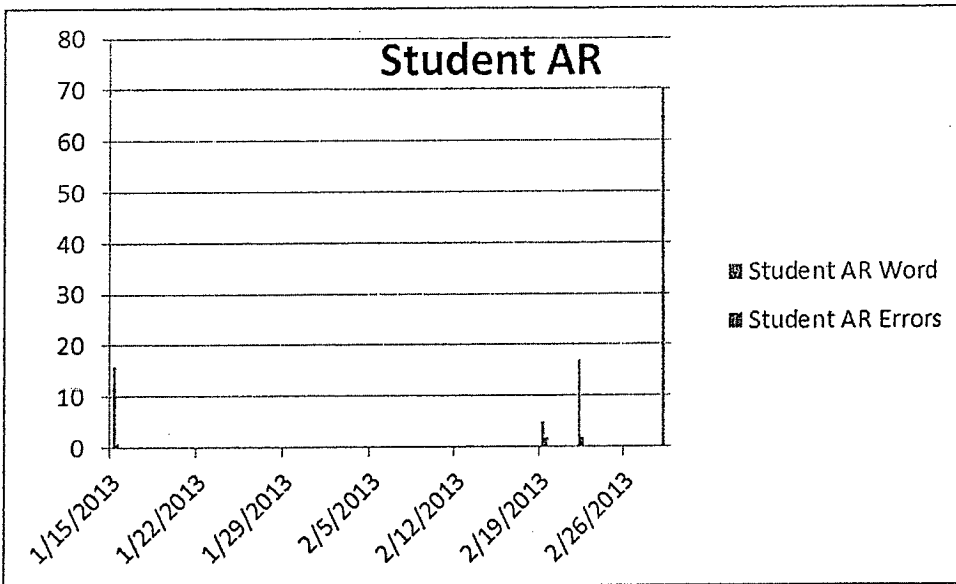


Figure 7.1 Student AR's Number of Words Written and Grammatical Errors Made

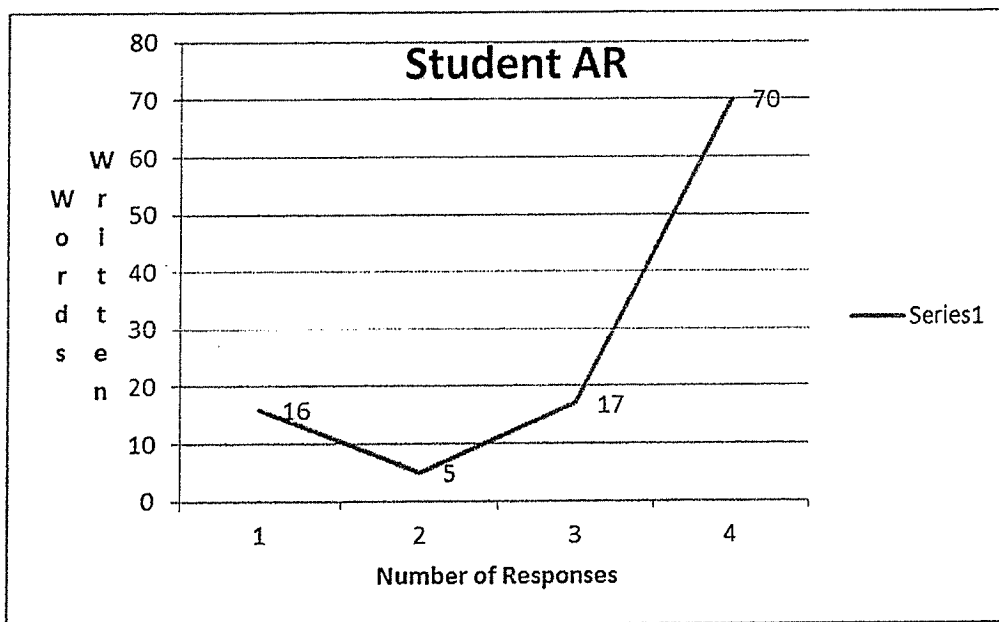


Figure 7.2 Student AR's Number of Words Written Per Post

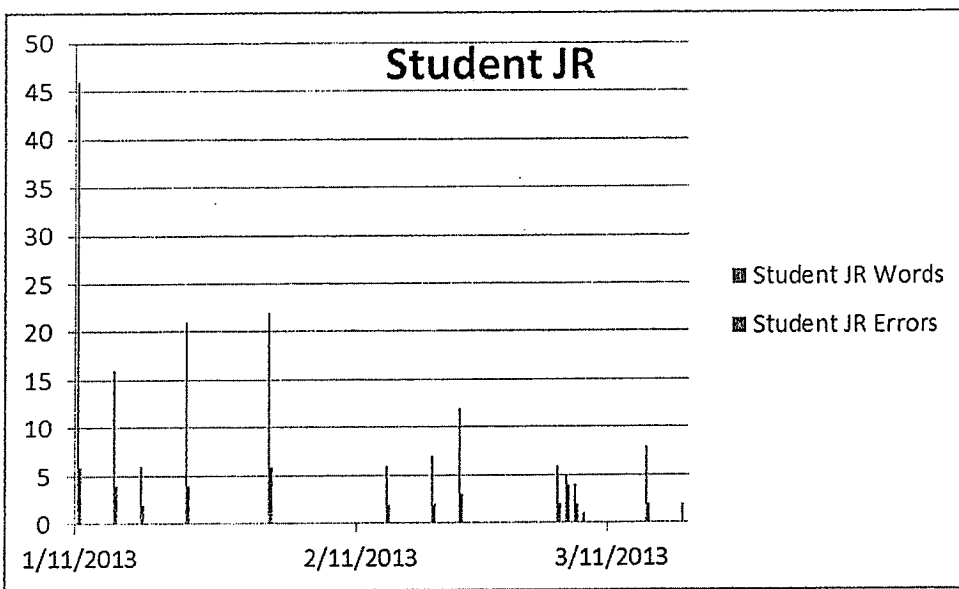


Figure 8.1 Student JR's Number of Words Written and Grammatical Errors Made

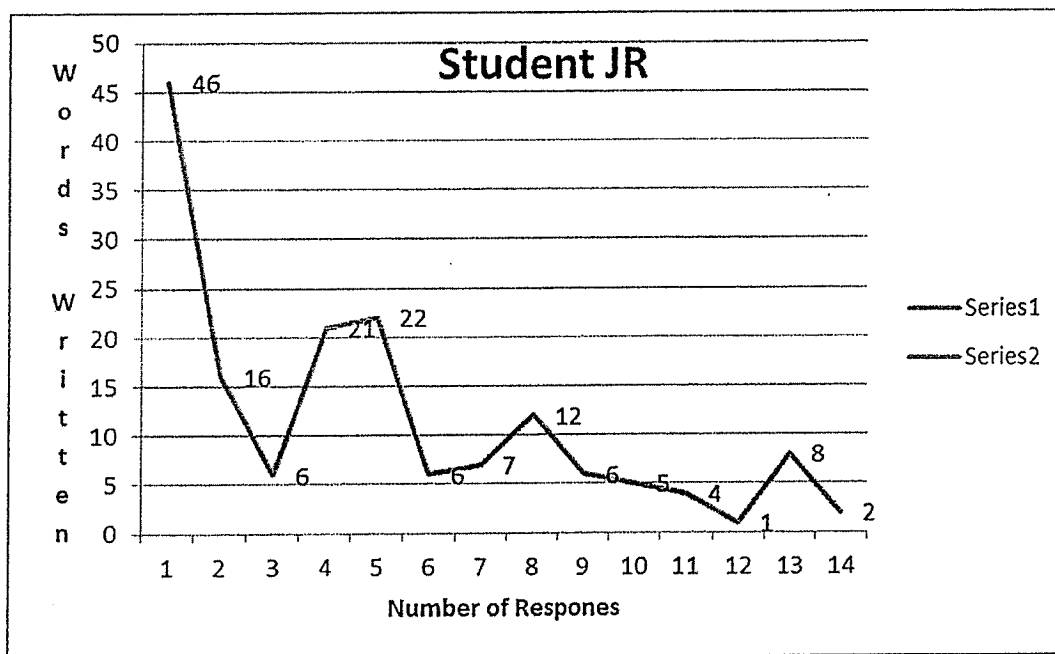


Figure 8.2 Student JR's Number of Words Written Per Post

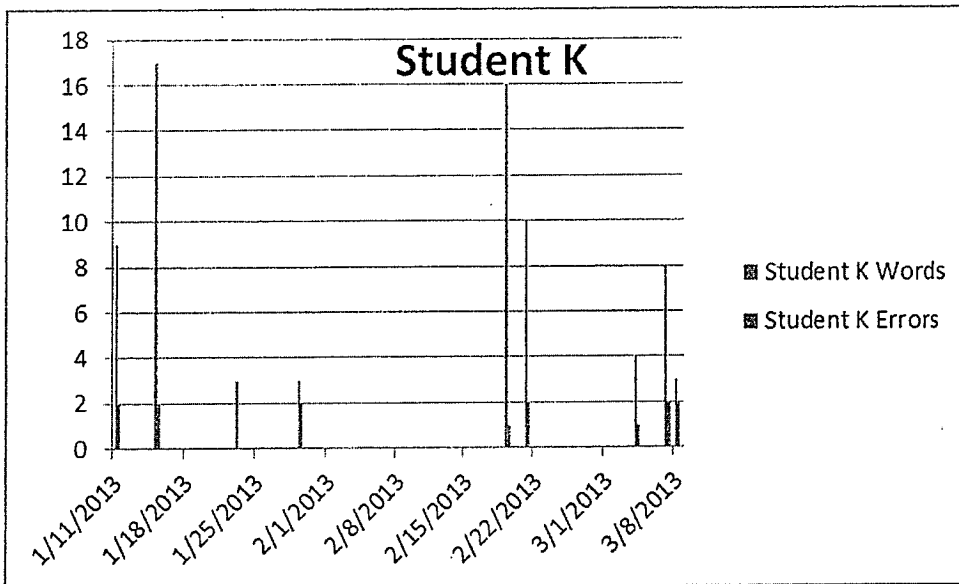


Figure 9.1 Student K's Number of Words Written and Grammatical Errors Made

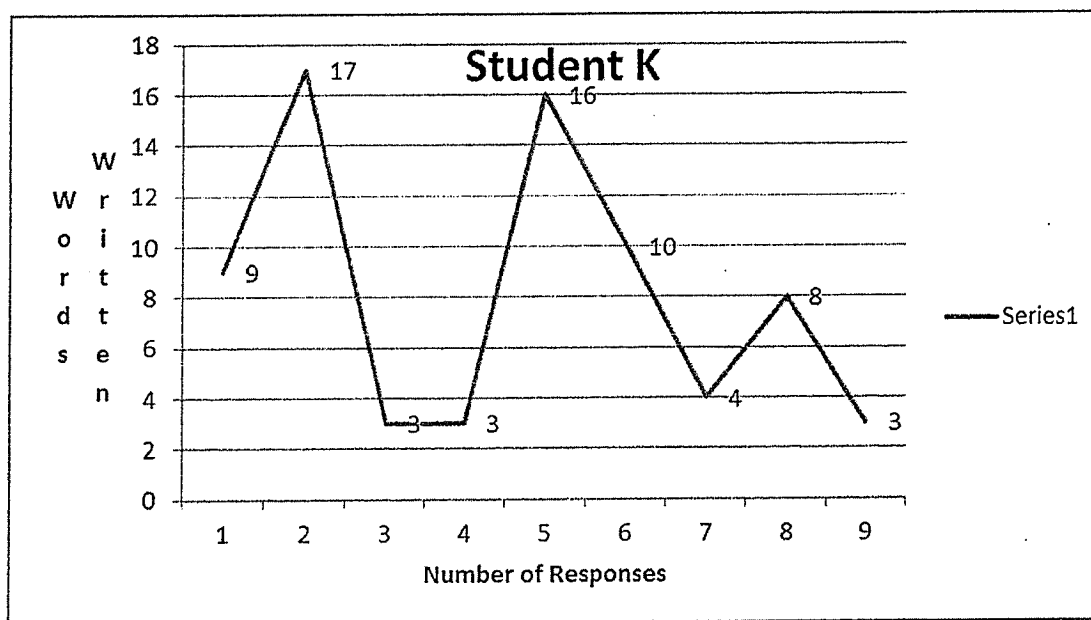


Figure 9.2 Student K's Number of Words Written Per Post

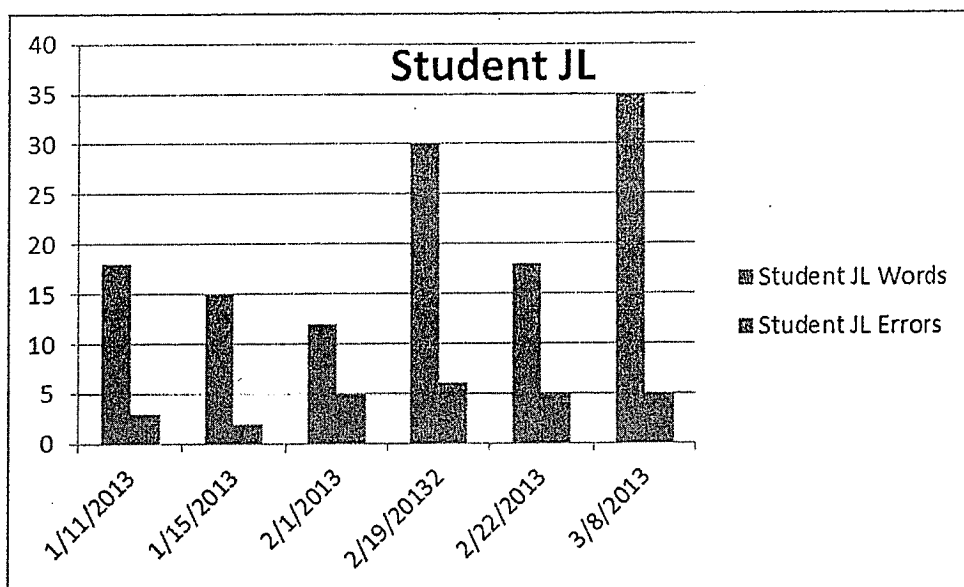


Figure 10.1 Student JL's Number of Words Written and Grammatical Errors Made

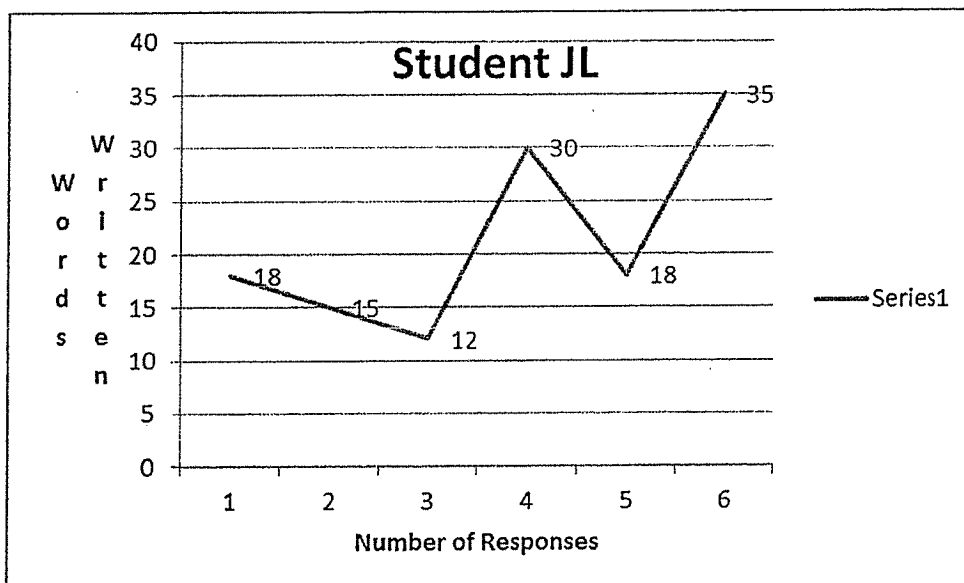


Figure 10.2 Student JL's Number of Words Written Per Post

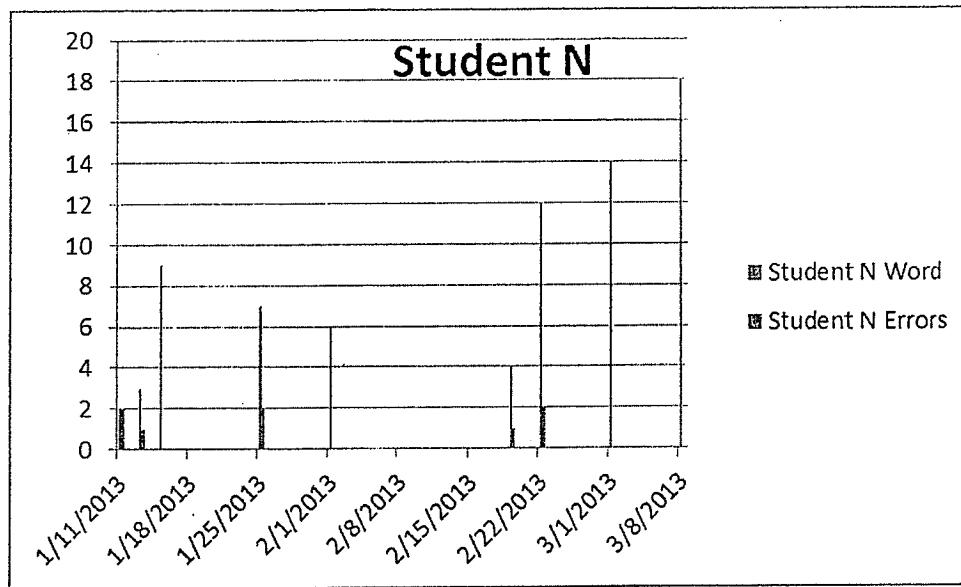


Figure 11.1 Student N's Number of Words Written and Grammatical Errors Made

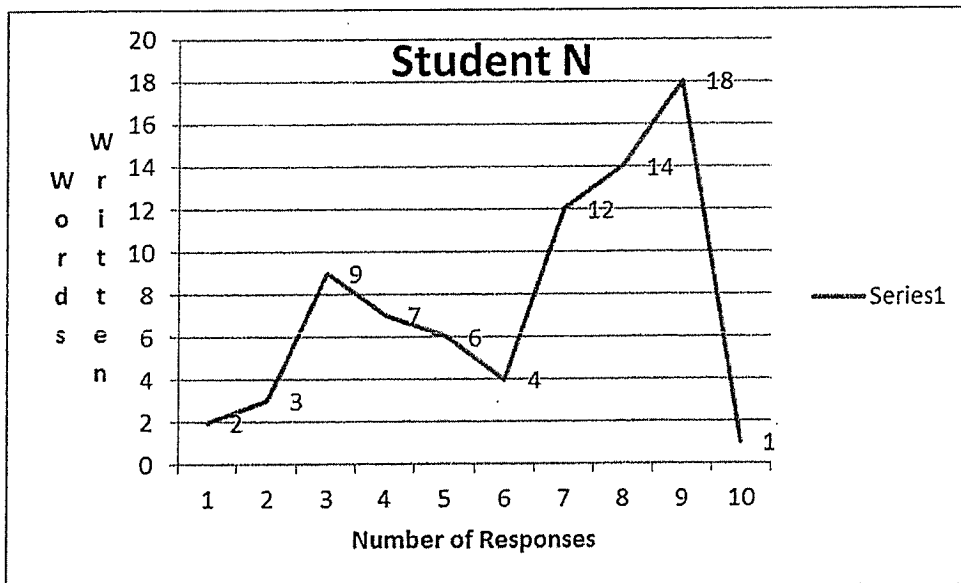


Figure 11.2 Student N's Number of Words Written Per Post

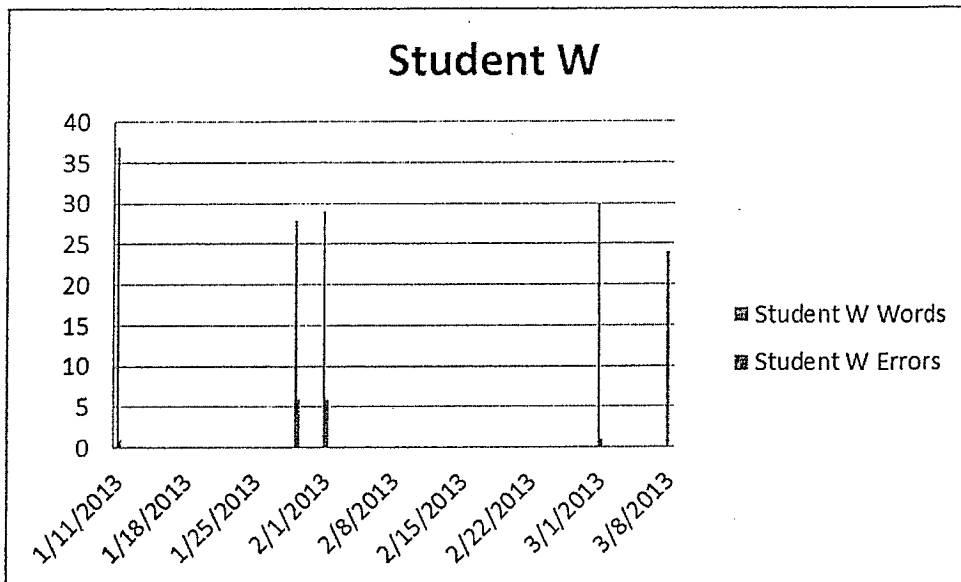


Figure 12.1 Student W's Number of Words Written and Grammatical Errors Made

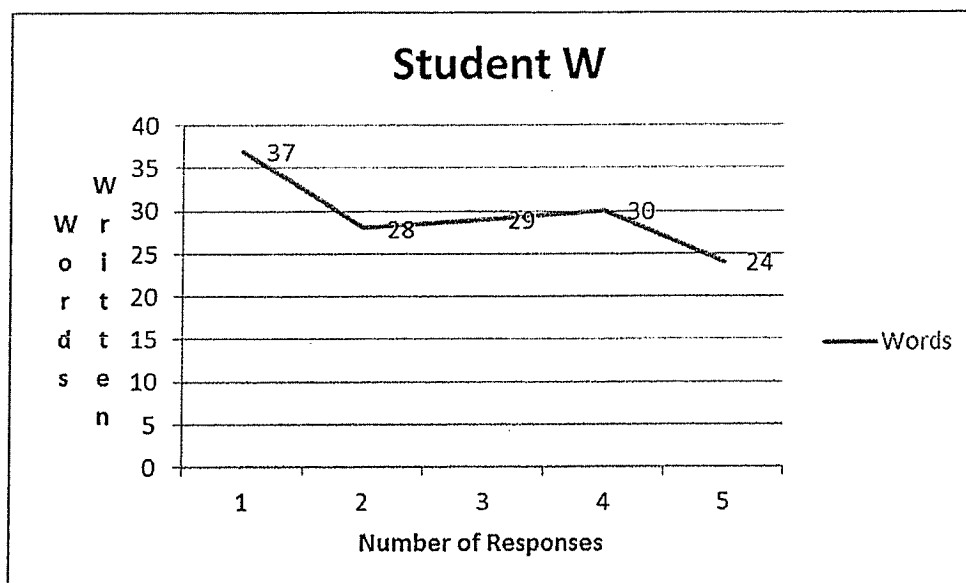


Figure 12.2 Student W's Number of Words Written Per Post

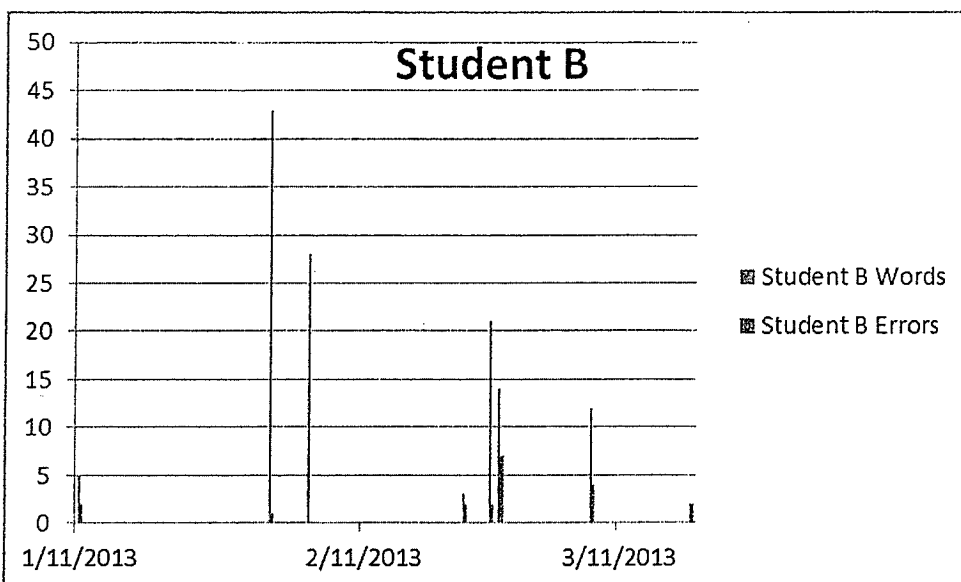


Figure 13.1 Student B's Number of Words Written and Grammatical Errors Made

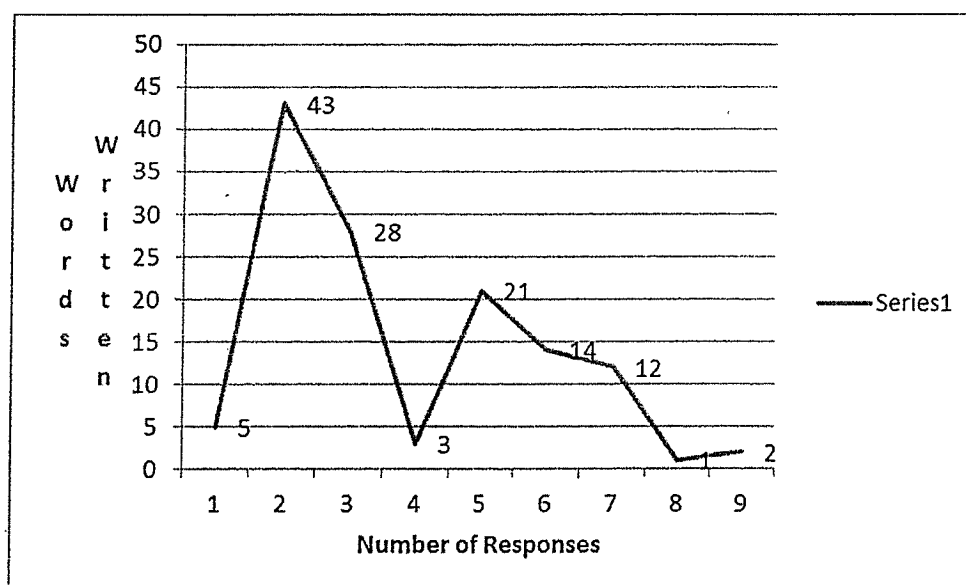


Figure 13.2 Student B's Number of Words Written Per Post

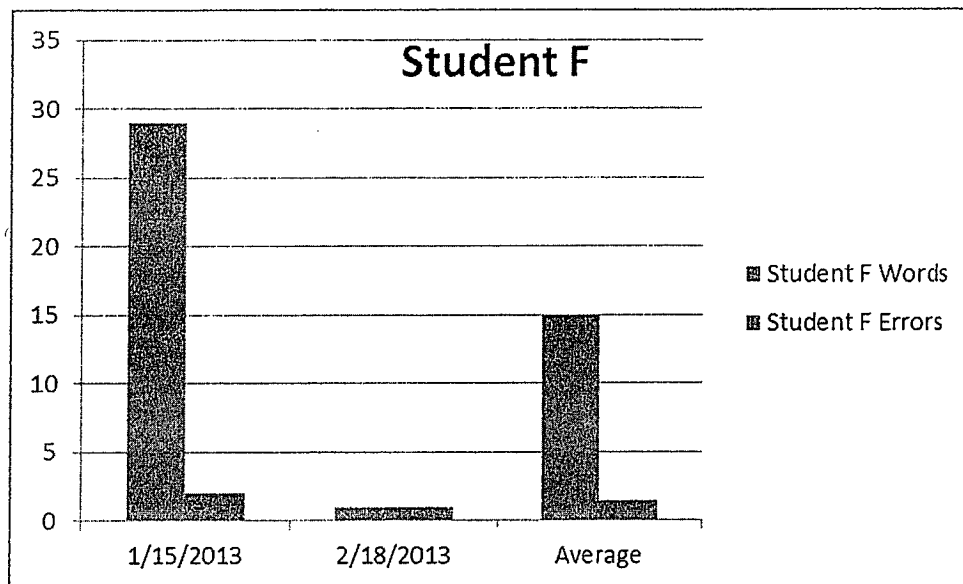


Figure 14.1 Student F's Number of Words Written and Grammatical Errors Made

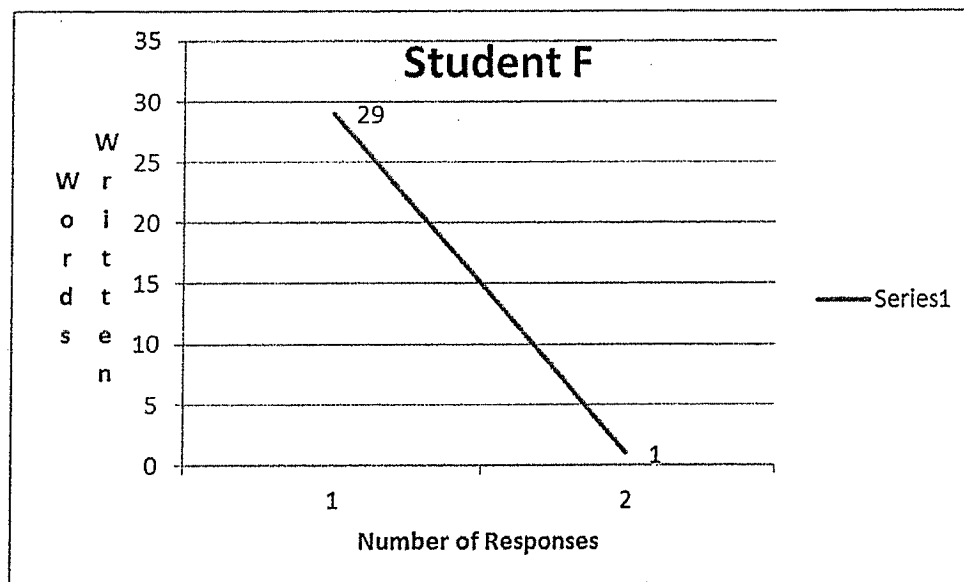


Figure 14.2 Student F's Number of Words Written Per Post

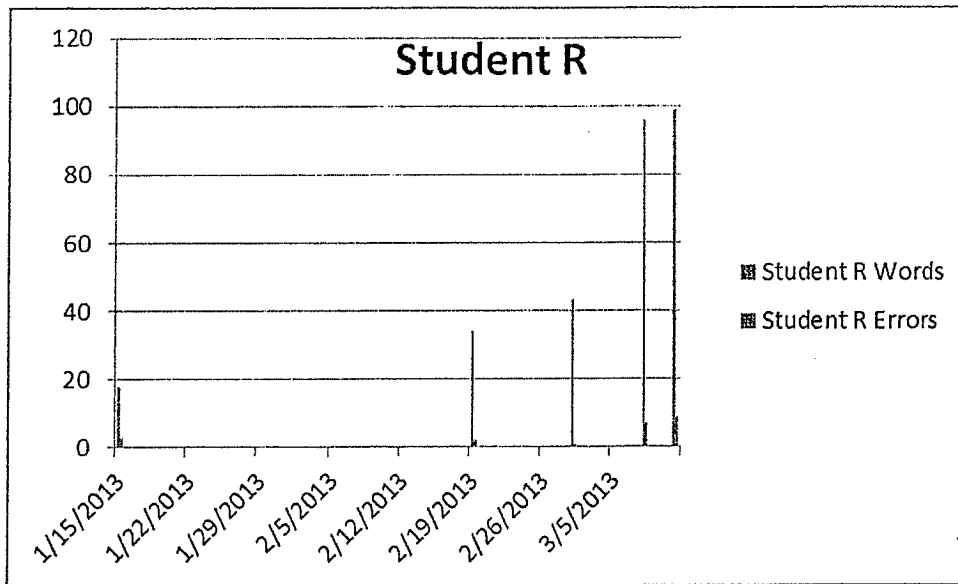


Figure 15.1 Student R's Number of Words Written and Grammatical Errors Made

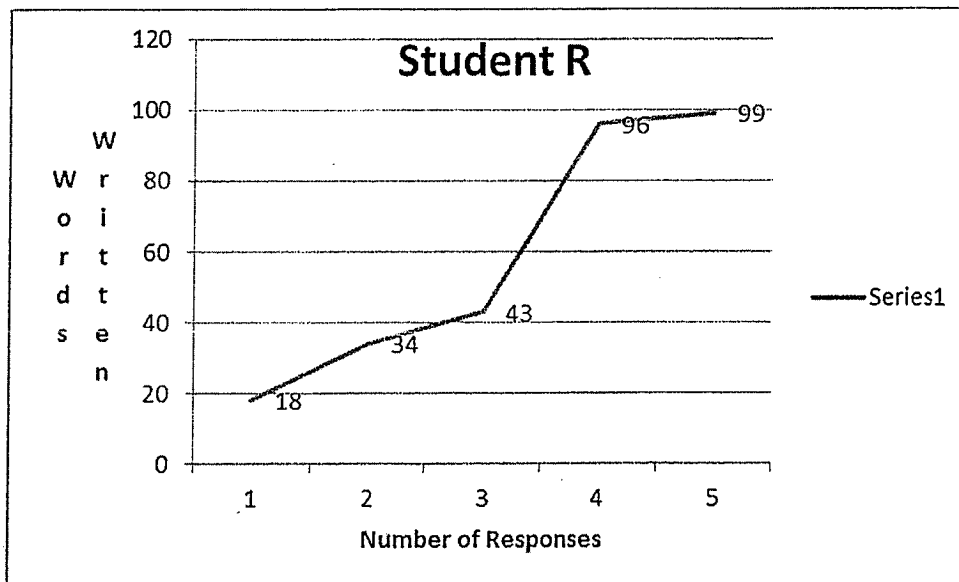


Figure 15.2 Student R's Number of Words Written Per Post

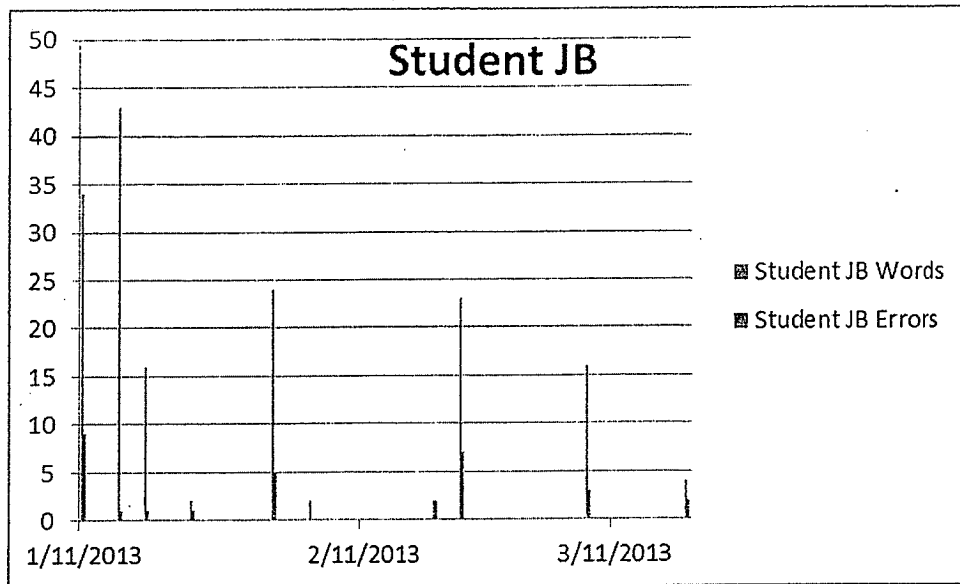


Figure 16.1 Student JB's Number of Words Written and Grammatical Errors Made

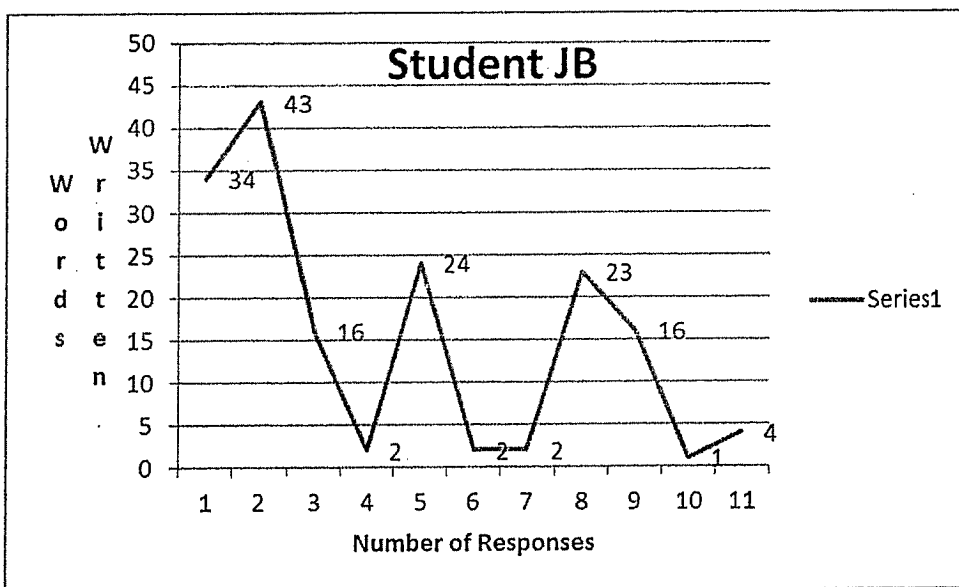


Figure 16.2 Student JB's Number of Words Written Per Post

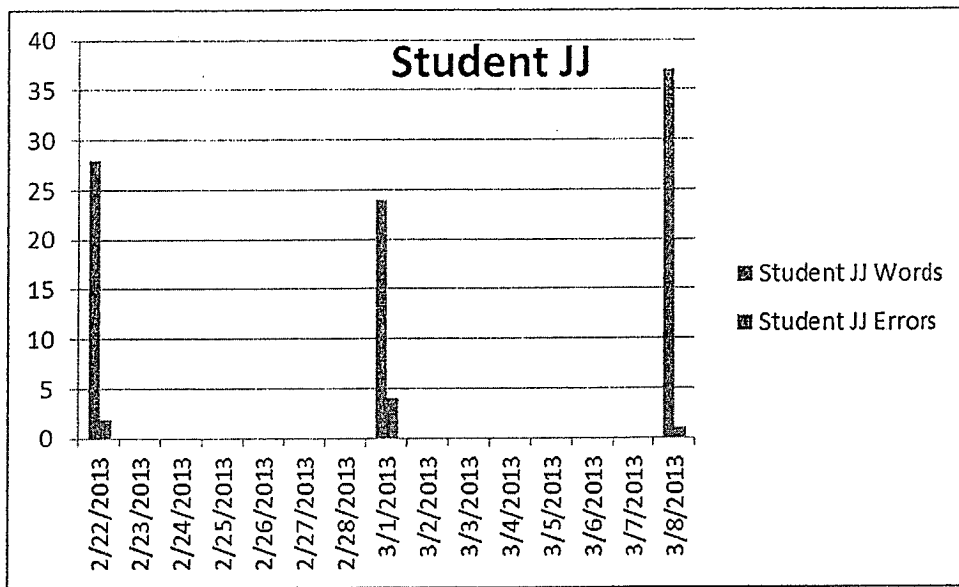


Figure 17.1 Student JJ's Number of Words Written and Grammatical Errors Made

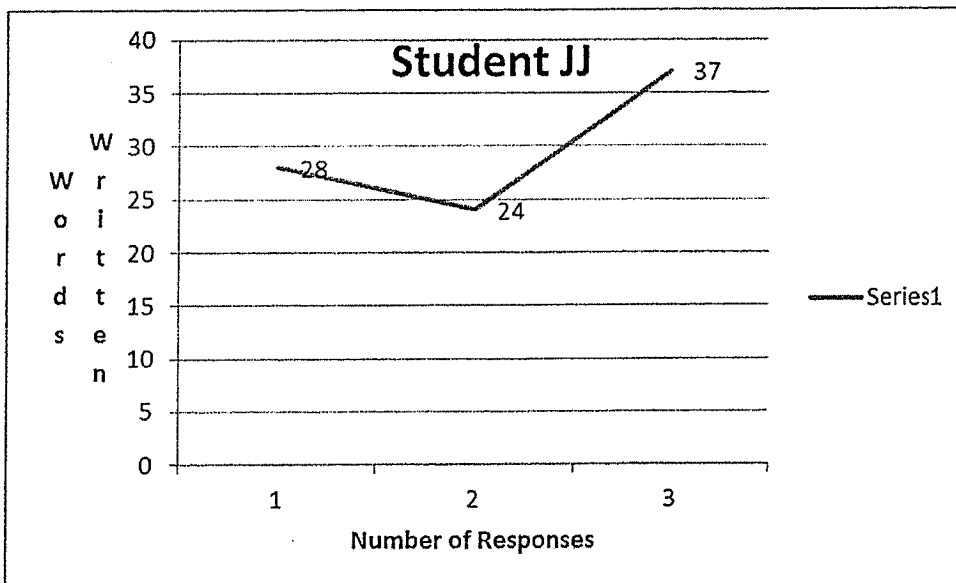


Figure 17.2 Student JJ's Number of Words Written Per Post

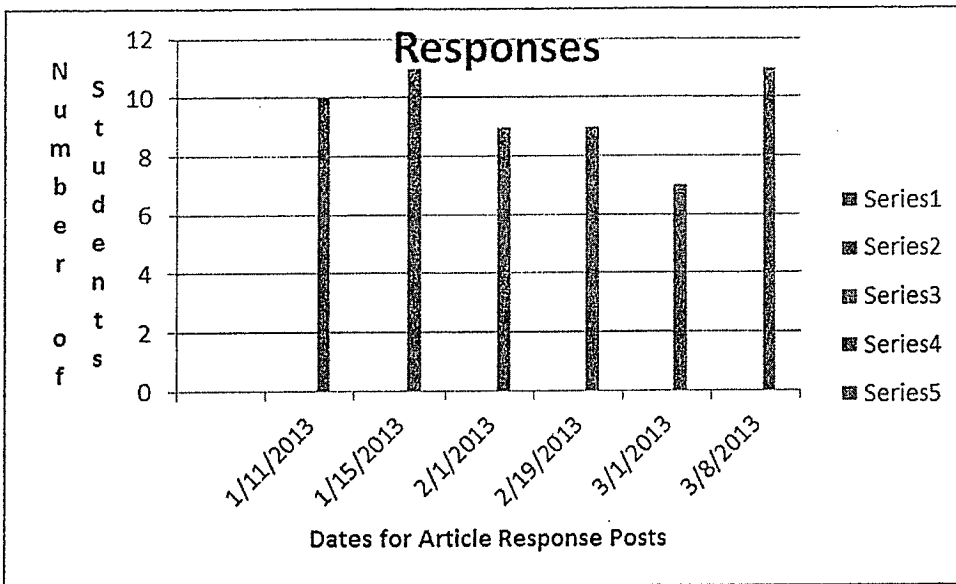


Figure 18.1 Dates of Responses and the Number of Students Which Responded

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