Suggestions for the Teaching of Writing:

From Students’ Reflective Narratives of English Writing Practices

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Keywords

teaching writing, autobiography, reflective narrative, writing teacher identity, writing teacher education

Abstract

Narratives have emerged in the area of second language (L2) writing and have played a key role as a proper research method. Reflective narratives have identified significant benefits by analyzing the writer’s experiences and insider perspectives in depth. Furthermore, stories shared by writers have validity in enriching their understanding further about personal realities and unraveling interpretive accounts with a critical eye. However, few studies demonstrate the findings of writing problems that students encounter and offer suggestions for teaching writing based on students’ experiences and practices of writing in English utilizing their detailed reflective narratives, especially in EFL contexts. This study focuses mainly on broadening possibilities for writing approaches suitable for teaching contexts as teacher development. The data analysis employed the categorization of 15 Japanese EFL undergraduates’ reflective narratives in three phases: the careful reading of all sentences in their reflective accounts of writing in English, the development of a temporary coding system, and the evaluation of the reliability of the coding system. The research findings show that the participants referred to the further importance of written structures (e.g., topic sentences and thesis statements), reader awareness for English writing at the university level, and joint work in the writing classroom. Suggestions for teaching writing are discussed in conforming to the findings of the students’ reflective narratives.
Introduction

Using autobiographies or reflective narratives is encouraged as a way to heighten awareness of the students’ learning and to construct the teacher’s identity. For instance, narratives enable learners to represent their insider’s view of the processes of language learning (Pavlenko, 2007) and help teachers guide their self-promotion as language teachers. Researchers have discussed the significance of employing students’ autobiographical accounts or narratives in second language (L2) writing scholarship (Canagarajah, 2015; Fujieda, 2012; Langum & Sullivan, 2017).

However, little research provides findings of writing problems that students encounter in the classroom using students’ autobiographical narratives. Applying autobiographies into research is a vital tool to “understand L2 learners’ learning sources, tasks, environments, and purposes” (Fujieda & Iida, 2015, p. 103). On the grounds of learners’ reflections, to present a constructive proposal is valuable in helping writing teachers seek a new way to writing instruction and in developing their expertise in L2 writing. Furthermore, the students’ real voices yield reliable data for exploring insight into writing teacher education in specific contexts.

This paper broadens the possibilities for writing approaches suitable for teaching contexts, using autobiographies and narratives. Finally, possible teaching activities are provided based on an analysis of the students’ reflections on their practices of English writing.

1. Review of the Literature

Reflective autobiographies and narratives are employed to provide students’/teachers’ real voices in the field of L2 education (De Finna & Georgakopoulou, 2015; Johnson & Golombek, 2011). This approach offers a viable method in qualitative research to promote further understanding of the learners’ experiences; what they did in and out of the class and what problems they encountered. Using narratives is a significant tool to explore the insider’s view because “narratives or (auto)biographies focus on the description and analysis of social phenomena as they are experienced within the context of individual lives” (Nunan and Choi, 2011, p. 226).

From the perspectives of language teaching research, narrative accounts have a positive effect on teacher development and the development of professional expertise (Farrell, 2015, 2016). Farrell (2015) argues that promoting teacher reflection is appropriate so that “teachers can make more informed decisions about their practice” (p. 8). Some studies which employed personal episodes illustrated the processes of language learning (Belcher & Connor, 2001) and discussed the teachers’ own teaching in specific contexts (Blanton, Kroll, Cumming, Erickson, Johns, Leki, Reid, & Silva,
Suggestions for the Teaching of Writing (Johnson & Golombek, 2002). Thus, applying autobiographies and narratives generates a remarkable research paradigm to pursue an intellectual approach to self-development as a language teacher and reflective practice.

In the case of L2 writing research, researchers emphasize the need for teacher’s reflective research on the teaching of writing or writing teacher education (Casanave, 2009; Hirvela & Belcher, 2007; Lee, 2013). For instance, Lee (2013) argues that L2 writing teachers need to understand their own ways of teaching to reexamine the approaches for writing instruction and how to deal with their problems of teaching. Such self-reflective analysis of teaching writing is necessary because “we have insufficient understanding of how L2 teachers teach and learn to teach writing, why they teach in the way they do, how they grapple with the problems and challenges they face, and how they develop expertise as teachers of writing” (Lee, 2013, p. 330). Furthermore, Casanave (2009) states that EFL writing teachers, in particular, need to uncover the current state of their classes to improve their teaching. EFL teachers tend to retain their positioning as language technicians, “who are always on the outlook for ways to adjust their agendas to the realities that they encounter” (Casanave, 2009, p. 273). Beyond the status quo as EFL writing teachers, Casanave (2009) suggests that they have to “observe closely the local needs and realities of their particular settings” (p. 274).

Using autobiographies or narratives for reflective investigations has opened a practical research avenue in the field of L2 writing. However, few studies have explored the feasibility of teaching writing and suggesting potential writing activities in the classroom based on students’ reflective narratives of writing in English. Suggestions for teaching writing underlying students’ reflection helps teachers cultivate their expertise and improve their writing instruction or approaches to meet the expectations within the educational context.

2. Research

To improve their teaching is essential for writing teachers to promote their self-development as writing teachers. Such reflective practices contribute to offering suggestions for practical and efficient approaches suitable in the context (Farrell, 2015). This present study provides suggestions for teaching writing based on the students’ reflection on their practices of English writing. To generate productive endeavors of writing, I set up a research question as follows: What are the possibilities for teaching writing in the required first-year writing class based on the students’ reflective narratives of writing in English?
2-1. Method

This study employed a qualitative method, a case study, on the grounds of the perspectives of a balanced approach (Farrell and Martin, 2009), which reinforces the value of learners’ tasks and products. The aim of the present study was to help the author himself develop his teaching of writing and offer potential activities of English writing at the higher education level deriving from the students’ reflections on their practices of English writing.

The participants in this study were 15 first-year students (two males and thirteen females) who joined a required course Written English at a four-year university in the academic year 2013, the second highest-level class B1 (TOEIC 400-495 or TOEFL iBT 40-51). The Written English B1 class highlighted one-paragraph writing at the beginning and shifted to essay writing, based on the topics in the textbook. Moreover, the students learned the basic structure of written English (introduction-body-conclusion) and had some practice with “reader-oriented” writing, with peer review sessions and teacher conferencing. Because all the students had never made an essay in English, the writing classes followed the traditional approach for process writing with repetitive writing tasks to improve students’ writing proficiency and apply their practical skills to their future English classes.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

To formulate constructive proposals for teaching writing in the investigator’s required writing course and cultivate his professional identity as a writing teacher, the participants’ reflective narratives of the English writing class were collected as the data sources after distributing the course grades. Each participant was asked to join the present study voluntarily in the next academic year. Since the research participants were the same students that the researcher taught in the writing course, ethical considerations had to be demonstrated sufficiently. Therefore, the research invitation was necessarily extended after the academic year so that the students could have no harmful effects on their course grade. When the students agreed, they signed an informed consent sheet with clear explanations about the research, following the research provisions of the university.

The participants’ reflective papers illustrated their practices and experiences of writing in English through one academic year. The participants looked back on their experiences of the writing class and freely described them in English in a narrative way. The researcher gave clues as to help the students recall their learning of writing in English; how the students went through various practices of writing in class and outside the classroom, and what they learned about writing in English.
After collecting the data, the researcher did member checks to confirm whether or not the texts that the researcher corrected and the interpretations were valid. When the data were available, the researcher carefully analyzed the data in an inductive way since qualitative methods are necessary to collect and analyze the data simultaneously (Merriam, 1998). To analyze the reflective papers, the data were coded, categorized, and recombined to make the present study consistent. To analyze the data, the reflective narratives were reviewed as an initial phase. Second, to categorize each sentence in the paper with a coding system and then, the data sources were divided into thematic categories (Charmaz, 2011). Finally, several emergent themes were drawn from the thematic categories.

4. Findings

Through meaningful and valuable reflection on the students’ practices of English writing, four major themes emerged: (a) Difficulty in expressing themselves, (b) Learning writing from rules, (c) Awareness of readers, and (d) Collaboration with others.

Theme 1: Difficulty in Expressing Themselves

Many participants made a point of confronting the issue of making English sentences with accuracy. When Japanese students write in English, they try to translate sentences into English. This process is a natural habit for writing in English since translation practice or the grammar-translation approach is still dominant at the secondary education level. One female student described, “Writing in English is difficult for me, I feel. I can't write English sentences well because I feel the fear of mistakes” (Student E). Such pressure to be grammatically perfect in writing remains a concern causing reluctance to write.

Most students felt that writing in English was painstaking since they had never had experience in practicing paragraph writing and producing some writing products in English in high school. In addition to difficulty in writing in English, students had difficulty in expressing themselves in English. Although they had ideas in Japanese, expressing them in a different language (i.e. English) perplexed them in how to describe their thoughts clearly in specific terms. As two students (Student B and C) pointed out, “I didn’t know how to write a paper in English because I have never written it… At first, writing was difficult for me because I couldn’t write what I wanted to say…I wanted to write well” (Student B), and “Unlike Japanese, writing in English was difficult for me. I wanted to write, but I couldn’t write the content clearly” (Student C).

Theme 2: Learning Writing From Rules
The students who took the writing class mainly practiced “sentence-making” tasks to write in English at the secondary school level. No students had practice in paragraph writing, so writing to learn led to the discovery of writing differences between Japanese and English. In particular, understanding the rules of English writing (e.g. formatting, structures of writing, conventions of writing patterns) was fresh for most participants. For instance, “I found the writing format of English is different from that of Japanese. In Japanese, people write the main sentence at the end, but in English, it should be at first” (Student G). In the previous critical research on L2 writing, the distinctions of writing structures between English and other languages exhibit the cultural phenomena (Connor, 2012; Hinds, 1990). Such differences naturally emerge as a characteristic of discourse patterns rather than inadequate English writing skills. For Student G, learning the position of the main point, even the fundamental point, encouraged her to promote an understanding of writing in English. Moreover, one student mentioned, “Topic sentence is very important for English writing. I learned that paragraph should begin with the main point… I didn’t know many rules of writing, so I was very surprised” (Student D). Her voice also indicated a key learning point of writing by learning the structural rules. Her statement contained a technical term, topic sentence, and codified the learning of making paragraphs through practice. As Student D alluded, the rules of which she had had no prior conception made her aware of the significant differences of writing between Japanese and English.

Theme 3: Awareness of Readers

“Writing for an audience” was one of the primary goals of the writing class. As repeatedly mentioned, students accustomed themselves to grammar-translation practices, however, this approach does not emphasize the reader; focusing on reviewing grammatical accuracy. To keep readers in mind, the composition course provided students an opportunity to hold peer-feedback sessions after students made a final draft. Through the oral peer conference, many students realized the importance of shifting their focus to the audience while writing in English. For example, “There is no point if the readers cannot understand the writing… I learned that I should write to make readers understand my writing” (Student J). In the case of Student J, although she completed her papers, her writing was not dedicated solely to her readers, simply referred to as writer-centered. However, she came to recognize the vital importance of specific descriptions in English writing so that the reader can understand the content. Other participants stated, “My writing should be clear because I always felt that there are people who will read my English sentences. So, I try to express more plain sentences to make people understand them” (Student A), and “I also found that using ‘big words’ is
not good for readers... Tense was not good; readers couldn’t understand my texts, talking about present or past events” (Student N). As the two students mentioned, using “more plain sentences” and avoiding “big words” offered hints for a solution for reader-oriented writing. They pinpointed the problems and found out the way to write without being persistent in their self-centering thoughts.

Theme 4: Collaboration With Others

In the field of L2 education, collaborative tasks with others are helpful to generate substantial benefits for language learning. This concept derives from the sociocultural theory from Vygotsky’s perspectives of engagement with more capable peers (Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). As mentioned in Theme 3, students had a chance to discuss their papers with their classmates. Some students showed the positive effects of peer feedback on the development of the subsequent revisions. For example, “I exchanged my assignments with my classmates and read them together. Then, I got some advice and feedback. It was a valuable experience for me to get my friends to read my work and hear their opinions” (Student H), or “In addition, it was very interesting to exchange my writing with classmates. They gave me good advice, for example, ‘this part is not necessary’” (Student J).

Besides, a few students used the peer tutor system in which the senior students (mentors) support students’ work of the classes. They were able to improve the quality of writing and understand the linguistic elements such as grammar issues or word choices. As the two students reveal, “Thanks to my teacher’s and tutor’s checking my English essays, my careless mistakes were decreased. They taught me suitable words and how to express my ideas” (Student F), and “I sometimes used the academic peer tutors. The tutor taught me grammar so that the meaning of my texts could be clear. I found that it is important to show my English texts” (Student N). In the writing class, engaging in the mutual activities with others contributed to the students’ development of writing in English. Being involved with others became vital for students’ achievements of English writing and aroused their interests in writing in English. As Student E said, “I thought that writing English texts was interesting because I could hear others’ opinions, from teachers, friends, and academic peer tutors. Thanks to their advice, I came to like writing in English.”

5. Suggestions for teaching approaches

This investigation highlights some snapshots of practices of writing in English by Japanese undergraduate students who took the required writing course. To understand the students’ experiences of English writing, this research employed a case study in a qualitative method and derived the emergent themes from the categories with a coding
system. By exploring the data source, four emergent themes were drawn. The 15 participants accomplished multiple practices of writing nourished a grounding in writing in a different language through analyzing the data of students’ reflective narratives of writing in English. Although the students encountered several problems of providing their definite opinions, they learned to write in and out of the classroom gaining a rudimentary understanding of the written structures of English and being engaged in dealing with collaborative tasks. By illustrating students’ contentment and conflicts, brief feasible proposals for writing activities can be made and discussed in my teaching context.

First, teaching the basic written structures of English is reasonable. Most Japanese first-year university students will be new to working on paragraph writing. To introduce the fundamental way of writing in English is a key to distinguish the structures of the first language from those of the target language. Writing textbooks mainly focused on the strategies for paragraph writing with process writing, so overviewing the steps of writing is a platform to adopt the university-level writing beyond sentence-based task. This approach does not impose on the values of the English rhetorical mode. As recent trends of teaching L2 writing emphasize the merits of multimodal discourse, adopting the fundamental structures of writing is to build primary knowledge of English writing (Horner, Lu, & Matsuda 2010).

Second, exposing more thoughts, even in the first language, is helpful. As the emergent theme 1 in this study revealed, students had difficulty in expressing themselves clearly. Before jumping to writing in English, compiling and crystallizing students’ thoughts is essential. One of the techniques of process writing, “jotting down,” is a fundamental way for writing. Like this approach, writing words down, even small pieces, should be done at the beginning. Employing learners’ first language (L1) can be heralded as a way to give concrete shape to their ideas. When students write a sentence, use of L1 needs to be encouraged. A major problem of writing is that students tend to make a literal translation of their intention, which hinders their performance. Teachers invite their learners to use L1 to confirm the apparent meaning; what they want to say. For instance, students can write a sentence provisionally and show it in L1 in brackets. By doing so, teachers are helpful to interact with texts and put in the necessary corrections. Students may refine their style and extend the range of writing proficiency, realizing that use of L1 in English writing is not a language limitation but a useful resource.

Finally, to initiate productive cooperative work in the classroom is significant to inspire students to realize reader-focused writing. What writing teachers have to guide
students in is that writing is not just a grammar-translation task, a myth which most learners believe. Students are expected to write an academic-oriented style of writing to have skills of objective writing at the higher education level, depending on the class, teacher, and policy of the program. To achieve the goal of the writing class, fostering the environment for joint work is necessary. For instance, peer feedback is helpful even though there still remain pros and cons of peer work in the classroom due to cultural factors. Sharing ideas is important to know what point is missing to make writing consistent. Group work is also useful during the beginning of the phase of writing such as brainstorming. When students have difficulty in expressing their ideas, a partner can give a hint to create a paper. A key to providing some collaborative tasks is teacher intervention. Before peer feedback sessions, teachers need to offer guidance to make students understand what they should do and what points they should focus on during the peer response, looking for the right time and monitoring the progression of student’s writing.

This present study offers suggestions for teaching writing underlying students’ reflective narratives; however, there are some limitations of this study to develop this type of L2 writing topic. First, this research employed a single data source (i.e. participants’ reflective papers) rather than multiple data sources. A qualitative study is a holistic approach providing penetrating insight in an individual or a small group case from multiple lenses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In order to explore learners’ practices or experiences of writing in English in detail, more data sources would be valuable to make the research consistent. For instance, individual interviews would be effective to elicit the participants’ tangible voices in addition to narratives. To delve into the research in a qualitative method, data triangulation or crystallization has several merits for using multiple data sources (Yin, 2013). As this study conducted an analysis based on the interpretations of the researcher, a deeper cross analysis employing both students’ and teacher’s reflective narratives would be beneficial.

Furthermore, to examine and elicit learners’ feelings, this type of study needs to explore aspects of emotionality towards writing in English. As language learning involves the complex web of emotions, further research is necessary to confirm how learners’ emotions affect in language learning. To do this, there are several approaches. Employing a method, Thinking At the Edge, might be feasible to draw emotions difficult to be expressible in word (i.e. felt sense) (Tokumaru, 2010). Learners’ poetry writing is also significant to express negotiated feelings of the writers (see Chamcharatsri, 2013; Hanauer, 2010; Iida, 2016). Such approaches, including reflective narratives, would help researchers see how to “overcome problems created by negative
emotions and how we can create and use more positive, facilitative emotions” (Arnold & Brown, 1999, p. 2 as cited in Chamcharatsri, 2013).

6. Summary

This paper focused mainly on suggesting teaching writing based on the students’ reflective narratives of their English writing. The purpose of this paper was to discuss the value of incorporate autobiographies and narratives into research on teacher development and find feasibility for writing approaches suitable for the teaching contexts. After demonstrating the emergent themes from the data categories, several teaching approaches were discussed. Students’ reflections help teachers generate various approaches for teaching writing to suit the educational circumstances, share similar and different problems, and to cultivate their expertise better understanding of teaching writing as writing teacher education.

References


要旨
学習者の省察から英語ライティング指導を考える
藤枝 豊

ナラティブ（語り）を用いた研究は、第二言語ライティング分野において、有効的な研究方法として注目されている。ライティング分野のナラティブは、学習者の経験や内面を探討し、ライティングの不安や葛藤を描写した研究、リテラシー活動をまとめた研究が主流である。語りを用いた話（ストーリー）は、書き手の現実や内面的側面を総体的にそして批判的に着眼できる研究手法と考えられている。

しかしながら、ライティング学習における内省的または自伝的語りを用いて、学習者が直面する問題を吟味し、ライティング指導を提案する研究はEFL環境（英語を外国語とする学習環境）において皆無に等しい。本研究は、ライティングの教師教育を目的とし、日本人大学生の英語ライティング活動の語りからライティング指導法を提案する。

被験者15名の英語ライティング活動の省察的語りをデータとして収集し、コード分析を実施した。コード分析から浮かび上がるテーマを導き、実践可能なライティング指導を考察した。分析結果から得られたテーマ、「ライティング構造理解の重要性」、「読者意識のライティング」、「ライティングの共同作業」からライティング指導の実践例を提案する。