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Engaging learners with journal writing

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Abstract

Traditionally, the main aim of learner journal writing in EFL has been to foster the development of L2 writing skills and critical reflection. Nevertheless, incorporating a weekly journal writing project into a required, one-semester general oral communication English course for university freshmen in Japan may present various challenges for teachers. In this paper, I shall suggest procedures for setting up journal writing tasks for independent pre-class study and how to implement grading strategies to ensure task completion and discourage absenteeism. I will also explain how to use these written texts as springboards for speaking practice to engage and motivate learners, to supplement and expand on course book content, and for course-final assessment of speaking ability. Results of a Likert-scale questionnaire and samples of comments provided by 79 freshmen students indicate largely favourable reactions to the journal writing and speaking tasks.

従来の EFL におけるラーナージャーナルを書くことの主要な狙いは、L2 writing skills と critical reflection の発達を促進することであった。しかしながら、日本の大学一年生向けの一学期の必修英会話総論コースに毎週のラーナージャーナル作成課題を取り入れることは教員に様々な困難をもたらすかもしれない。本稿では、独立した事前学習としてジャーナル作成課題を計画する際の手順と、課題を完了させ、欠席を減らすのを促すため

の成績判定方法を提示する。さらに、どのように利用すれば these written texts (by who?) が英会話練習のやる気を引き出すきっかけとして、教科書の内容からさらに発展して学ぶ足掛かりとして、そして英会話能力を計る最終考査で役立つかも論じる。Likert-scale アンケートの結果と一年生の学生 79 人から寄せられたコメントは、ジャーナル作成・英会話課題に対して概ね好意的な反応が得られたことを示している。

Journal writing in EFL: benefits and purposes

Addressing the learner in her course book *First Steps in Academic Writing*, Hogue (2008) defines a learner journal as “a notebook in which you write about your life and your thoughts”. She adds that: “Your teacher will not grade your journal, so journal writing is a good way to practice new skills without worrying about a grade” (p.8). The underlying belief here is that more writing, in a situation where errors will not be rained upon with red ink by the teacher, allows for risk-taking in experimentation with unfamiliar forms, and improvement in writing speed or writing fluency. This belief is well-reflected in the literature where numerous commentators have echoed the benefits of the learner journal as a useful learning task for the development of language skills when completed regularly. Besides their role in language skill development, Bray (1996), Takaesu (2012), and Tuan (2010) emphasize the value of the journal as a forum for reflecting on the language learning process, allowing the teacher to glean useful information on the L2 learner experience from a user perspective.

However, the purpose of the journal writing project described in this paper differs from traditional approaches described elsewhere in the literature in two key ways. First, the journals do not constitute “free” writing in that topics are predetermined by the teacher and

completing weekly entries is compulsory. Second, they are not fora, or forums, for reflections on the learning process. While the project does allow for reflection and L2 writing skill development, the purpose is primarily to ensure that learners have written a short speech to deliver at the beginning of each class to foster the development of speaking skills.

Whatever the purpose of journal writing, one cannot ignore the undercurrent of disagreement in the literature concerning treatment of error and teacher response to learner writing. While the tendency during the boom in communicative language teaching (CLT) during the last three decades of the twentieth century was to avoid correction of student writing (Robb, 1986; Truscott, 1996; and Zamel, 1987), mainly due to the persistence of error in L2 user writing, many later commentators such as Ferris (2004) have taken up arms against this *laissez-faire* approach. While Robb concludes that “more direct methods of feedback do not tend to produce results commensurate with the amount of effort required of the instructor to draw the student’s attention to surface errors” (p.88), Ferris cites numerous studies which indicate that correction results in language learning gains. He also makes repeated claims that feedback on error is what learners expect from their teachers, and CLT had done the foreign language teaching profession a disservice by prioritizing content over form.

The teaching situation and overview of the course

With these benefits and pitfalls in mind, this paper describes strategies employed to maximize the potential of an English journal writing project with mostly non-English major, or largely cross-departmental, required general English classes for freshmen at two universities in

Japan: Hokkaido University and Otaru University of Commerce. Although students in classes at both universities are high in terms of level compared with many other universities in Japan, with 25–35 students in each class, non-attendance and lack of motivation had been a problem in the past before the introduction of this project. These courses last one semester only and consist of fifteen once-a-week ninety-minute lessons. During the first class meeting, the students are told that they must:

- (i) Buy and bring the textbook (*Touchstone 3A*, McCarthy et al, 2008),
- (ii) Buy a B5-size lined notebook and write at least 200 words before class every week,
- (iii) Write the first journal task for the second class meeting: “Describe your personality. What kind of person are you?”
- (iv) Count and enter the number of words they have written at the end of their writing.
- (v) Read the first lesson of the course book, which deals with personality, for ideas and vocabulary to assist them with the writing task.

The remaining nine topics for weekly journal writing tasks for this spring semester course focus on the content of lessons from the course book to be covered in the lessons immediately following the writing and these are: (i) Someone I admire, (ii) The annoying habits of someone I know, (iii) My secret dreams, (iv) A memorable experience, (v) The best trip I ever took, (vi) What issues do your family argue about? (vii) Memories of my childhood, (viii) My family history, and (ix) My plans for the summer holidays. Similarly, in support of the textbook lessons to be covered in the fall semester class (*Touchstone 3B*, McCarthy et al, 2008), the following journal topics are prescribed: (i) My circle of friends, (ii) The story of a romance, (iii) My neighbours, (iv) How I wish my life were different, (v) If you could change three things about this

university, what would you change? (vi) The pros and cons of SNS, (vii) Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? High School Students should not bring their phones to school, (viii) My recent activities, (ix) My favourite movie, and (x) What did you do in your New Year holiday? In general, these topics encourage learners to preview the forthcoming lesson for ideas and linguistic resources, notice and address deficiencies in their own linguistic resources through the process of writing by using a dictionary, and ensure that they are primed to engage in interactions on the topics to be covered.

Before explaining the grading policy in this teaching situation, in view of the fact that there are abundant alternatives for independent study, or homework tasks, having learners write journals requires some justification. Commonly set homework tasks include having learners regularly complete the workbook exercises that accompany the course book. However, while the workbooks in the *Touchstone* series are excellent, university students tend to copy answers from their classmates' completed workbooks, or any language exercises on printed handouts for that matter, shortly before the lesson starts, thereby defeating the purpose of the activity. Added to this, English teachers at university level in Japan may need to consider the impact of secondary level English education on their students when designing courses of study. For example, with reference to university entrance exams in Japan, Yasukouchi (2014) finds: "Roughly 80% of questions are related to reading, roughly 20% to writing, 2% to listening, and none to speaking." Preparation for these tests naturally leads to neglect of two key productive skills: writing and speaking. In view of this imbalance of language skills, the notion of emphasizing productive tasks such as personalized extensive writing, rather than receptive, form-focussed, accuracy-based, or non-personalized tasks set in high school for univer-

sity entrance exam preparation purposes, appears to have some grounding.

Grading policy

Referring back to Hogue's suggestion that one of the benefits of voluntary English journal writing for independent study is that learners can practise and develop their writing skills, in my experience of the teaching situation described, learners do not engage in independent study unless task completion is part of their grade. Therefore, in the orientation session, students are informed that their journals will be inspected at the beginning of each class and points awarded *only* for those students who have completed the task as instructed, and that, following Hogue, their writing will not be graded for quality or accuracy. The teacher should check for task completion by walking round the classroom and distributing a paper "point card" (see Appendix 1) with an automatic 5 points awarded for task completion, or 0 (checked immediately) if the learner has not completed the task, or if she has written less than 200 words and has lied about the word count, or even if the writing is on loose-leaf paper. To save time, if a journal entry appears to be less than the required minimum of 200 words, another student is tasked with counting the number of words written and checking the word count while distribution of point cards continues elsewhere in the classroom.

They are also informed that they will complete 10 journal writing tasks during the course of the semester and that in total the task will be worth 25% of their final grade. The remainder of the grade is calculated through three sets of scores, each weighted at 25%: weekly class quizzes, a final paper test, and a final speaking test, to be de-

scribed later. At some stage during the lesson, there is a listening test, vocabulary test, or oral cloze test from a dialog they have studied in class (with course books closed). There are always five items on this quiz, and the students write their answers on their point cards and return them to the teacher immediately after the quiz.

In sum, with the weekly point cards, the grading policy is weighted at 50% towards continual assessment, thus discouraging absenteeism and rewarding those who attend regularly. Since the journals are not graded for quality, or accuracy, students are rewarded for time invested in study. In this way, we reward “flying time”, or time spent on independent study tasks, a key ingredient for second language acquisition.

Engaging learners with their learner journals in the classroom

Ellis (1994) claims that “it is possible that the long-term effectiveness of formal instruction is contingent on the availability of opportunities to communicate in the L2” (p.617). In other words, it is essential for the teacher to provide abundant opportunities to communicate in the language classroom. Further, it is possibly advantageous to harness the natural energy or dynamism that students bring to class by beginning an English class with speaking activities. What follows is a description of recommended procedures for how to use journals as a springboard for immediate classroom interaction.

Having distributed the point cards, the students are ready to engage, but before they do so they are required to do the following. First, they must choose a partner and write their partner’s name and date inside the front cover of their course book. Since they must choose a new partner every class, this routine helps the students remem-

ber who they have worked with in previous lessons. Furthermore, it gives them the opportunity to make friends among classmates and to compare their quality of writing and speaking with multiple partners through the duration of the course. To save time, they are urged to select a partner before the class begins. Second, once they have arranged themselves in pairs, they turn their desks to sit opposite their partners and close their journals. After performing a game of *janken* to decide who speaks first, a timer is set for three minutes and Speaker 1 is invited to tell her partner what she has written. When time is up, Speaker 2 makes a comment about what she has heard and asks a question to Speaker 1 concerning the short speech she has heard. Two minutes is allowed for the following discussion, whereupon the process is repeated with Speaker 2 delivering her speech to Speaker 1, also with follow-up discussion. An iPad timer application which plays music to signal to the class that time is up is preferable to shouting “stop”, especially since the main role of the teacher is to use his voice to encourage interaction in the classroom rather than terminate it abruptly.

A highly recommended expansion to the journal-based speaking activity is inspired by the “4-3-2” activity (Maurice, 1983). In “4-3-2”, learners repeat their speech three times, beginning with a four-minute speech, followed by task repetition with another classmate for three minutes, with a third and final speech with another classmate lasting two minutes. In this teaching context, speeches are time-reduced in a 3-2-1 format. As Nation (2009) explains, one of the advantages of the activity is that its demands are “limited to a much smaller set than would occur in most uncontrolled learning activities” (p.153), thereby encouraging spoken fluency and chunking of language.

Once these speaking activities have reached their conclusion, they

exchange journals with their partners, read their partner's entry and write comments. Three minutes are allowed for this final reading and writing activity. At the end of the sixth class meeting, by which time five journal entries have been completed, all the journals are collected allowing the teacher to write comments. This procedure is repeated following the twelfth meeting once the final five writing tasks have been completed.

Although there may appear to be no further use for the journal during the course of the remainder of the lesson, students are asked not to put them away in their bags for two reasons. First, while students are engaging in pair or group speaking activities, or while they are silently completing a language-focussed exercise, there may be time available for the teacher to casually pick up and read journal entries. This can be especially useful when some individual students or pairs have finished activities much earlier than their peers thereby allowing time for them or teacher to interact and engage in conversation on the content of their journals. Second, the journals can act as useful filler activities if there are ten minutes to spare at the end of the lesson. For example, students are given one minute to re-read a previous journal entry of their choice, or their partner's choice, before closing it again and giving a three-minute speech.

The end-of-term speaking test

In the end-of-term speaking test, the same procedures explained in the weekly, journal-based speaking task are adopted for assessment purposes. Before beginning the test, the grading rubric (see Appendix 2) is distributed and the grading criteria is explained. Students are told in the orientation, and reminded several times during the course, that

they should select three topics for the speaking test, and be prepared to produce a short speech on any one of them. This option is preferred to having them choose only one topic since it may be insufficiently challenging. In contrast, from the learner's perspective, having to prepare for three speeches increases the test preparation load, and therefore, from the teacher's perspective, hopefully maximizes the learning benefits of speech rehearsal by raising the test performance bar over which they must pass.

Following explanation of the assessment criteria, students are invited in pairs, or groups of three, with no predetermined order, to come to a rear corner of the classroom, and to hand in their assessment rubric with their three topic choices entered in the spaces provided. They are also required to bring their journals to allow me to check that, for example, they do not use the same speech to respond to any of the following topics: *a memorable experience*, *the best trip I ever took*, and *memories of my childhood*. To select the topic for the speech, the students turn over one of three playing cards (Ace for 1, two, or three). When the first speaker is ready to begin, she presses the timing application on an iPad.

During the speech, the teacher listens to and grades performance. With reference to the assessment rubric, provisional sampling and rating of scores begins at the top with pronunciation, where learner performance, and therefore oral rater impressions do not usually change very much following the initial one minute of speech. However, adjustments can be made to each measurement category (fluency, grammar and vocabulary, content, and timing) as the speech progresses. Content refers to how interesting the content of the speech is. Points are deducted if the speaker fails to continue the speech for the full three minutes. Following the monologic, or short speech stage of

the test, adjustments are most often made to scores in the fluency and content categories in the dialogic, or comment, question and answer stage, lasting two minutes as in the journal speaking activity described earlier. This tends to happen when unprepared discussions develop and the learners are required to draw on what Bygate (1987) describes as “improvisational skills”. With large classes, the speaking test period can be divided over two ninety-minute periods, and two minutes can be allocated to the speech instead of three.

This journal-based format of the speaking test has solid claims to validity not only in that it reflects the way the lessons have been conducted, but also because it bears several similarities to procedures in the following two public speaking examinations. First, in the IELTS speaking test Part 2, candidates are given a task card with some key points to talk about, one minute to mentally plan a response, and a maximum of two minutes to speak. Second, in the TOEIC test of Speaking and Writing, thirty seconds are given to reflect before responding to two speaking tasks within a one-minute time limit.

Results of a survey on learner attitudes to the journal project

In order to investigate user attitudes to the procedures described in this paper, an anonymous Likert-scale questionnaire (see Appendix 3) was completed by 78 students from three intact classes, with comments volunteered in Japanese. The results are reported in Table 1 below.

With reference to Table 1 above, the results generally indicate favourable reactions to the journal task with regard to skills improvement. This applies to learner perceptions of the benefits of the activities described in this paper to both their writing skills (Item 2) and speaking skills (Item 4). However, with reference to writing skills

Table 1.

Results of a Likert-scale questionnaire on the use of journals.

Do you agree with the following statements?

Key for questions 1-7: 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= not sure, 4= agree, or 5= strongly agree

[6= no response given].

| Likert-scale 1-5 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|----|----|----|-----|---|
| 1. The teacher should give homework each week for this class. | 1 | 17 | 16 | 29 | 14 | 1 |
| 2. The weekly journal writing activity is useful for improving my English writing skills. | 1 | 7 | 14 | 29 | 27 | 0 |
| 3. The teacher should read and correct my journal writing. | 1 | 15 | 8 | 26 | 28 | 0 |
| 4. Telling my partner what I wrote in my journal is useful for improving my English speaking skills. | 2 | 4 | 15 | 29 | 28 | 0 |
| 5. The journal writing topics were interesting. | 2 | 3 | 28 | 33 | 12 | 0 |
| 6. I enjoyed reading my classmates' journals and writing comments. | 1 | 4 | 11 | 38 | 23 | 1 |
| 7. The system of assessment (25% for journals, 25% for weekly class quizzes, 25% for the paper test, and 25% for the final speaking test) is fair. | 3 | 8 | 11 | 26 | 30 | 0 |
| | 30 | 40 | 50 | 60 | 60+ | |
| 8. How long does it take to write the journal task each week [in minutes] ? | 3 | 28 | 6 | 34 | 6 | |

development, whereas some students wrote comments in the questionnaire that the time it had taken them to complete the weekly writing task decreased week by week, others noted that some writing tasks took longer than others due to variation in the difficulty of the task. Further, most of the learners found the journal topics interesting (Item 5) and the majority also enjoyed reading their classmates' journals and writing comments (Item 6). These findings lend support to the notion that this journal project has the potential to engage or motivate

learners. Added to this, most respondents believe the system of assessment was fair (Item 7). In contrast, with reference to Item 3, the majority of those who completed the survey stated that the teacher should read and correct their journal writing. This reaction is in line with beliefs about responding to student writing expounded by Ferris (2004) mentioned earlier. It also indicates that the author's policy of not correcting errors ran counter to their expectations. To compound the potential for student dissatisfaction, responses to Item 1 indicate that nearly one in four students disagreed with the setting of compulsory homework tasks in the first place. Further, especially with these students who are opposed to compulsory independent study, it is almost certain that the considerable time invested to write the weekly journal (60 minutes or more for more than half the respondents, in Item 8) meant that the task was an unwelcome burden for many of them.

Conclusion

While for the most part the survey results indicate a good match between the beliefs of the author and those of the students, a change of policy is clearly called for regarding the non-correction of errors. In considering the usefulness of providing corrective feedback to improve student writing, Leki (1990) reminds us of "the enormous amount of time and energy poured into written commentary on student papers" from the teacher's point of view. However, in this situation, it appears necessary to heed the tide of opinion and invite those learners who desire feedback on error to submit photocopies of their weekly writing for correction.

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Appendix 1. Point card

| |
|----------------------|
| Name _____ no. _____ |
| Total score ____/10 |
| Journal score 0 or 5 |
| Quiz score ____/5 |
| Quiz answers: |
| 1. |
| 2. |
| 3. |
| 4. |
| 5 |

Appendix 3

Questionnaire about English Journals

Do not write your name or student number on this paper

Please write your comments in Japanese.

Please, please write some comments.

I will have them translated in English.

Do you agree with the following statements?

Circle: 1= Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Not sure, 4= agree, or 5= strongly agree

1. The teacher should give homework each week for this class.

| | | | | | |
|----------|---|---|---|---|---|
| Comment: | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|----------|---|---|---|---|---|

2. The weekly journal writing activity is useful for improving my English writing skills.

| | | | | | |
|----------|---|---|---|---|---|
| Comment: | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|----------|---|---|---|---|---|

3. The teacher should read and correct my journal writing.

Comment:

1 2 3 4 5

4. Telling my partner what I wrote in my journal is useful for improving my English speaking skills.

Comment:

1 2 3 4 5

5. The journal writing topics were interesting

Comment:

1 2 3 4 5

6. I enjoyed reading my classmates' journals and writing comments

Comment:

1 2 3 4 5

7. The system of assessment (25% for journals, 25% for weekly class quizzes, 25% for the paper test, and 25% for the final speaking test) is fair.

Comment:

1 2 3 4 5

8. How long does it take you to write the journal task each week? Circle the nearest

Comment:

30 40 50 60 minutes
longer

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.