

Constructing Writer Identities in a Japanese EFL Setting

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Keywords

teaching writing, EFL, autobiography, writer's identity, discourse

Abstract

This paper explores how Japanese English language learners construct their writer identities as college students. Specifically, this study examines the autobiographical narratives of five college-level English language learners, describing their activities and experiences of writing classes in high school and college. This present study shows that the participants have constructed their writer identities, negotiating their past and present practices of writing in school. Finally, this paper discusses implications for teaching writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings in Japanese higher education.

Introduction

Exploring the writer identity of second language (L2) or foreign language learners is a significant issue to find out learners' positionalities in specific learning contexts. Most English language learners go through various processes and conflicts of constructing writer identities, while writing or establishing discourses in English. In order to position themselves in specific settings, learners attempt to form their identities. Research on constructing identities has been conducted using the autobiographical narrative approach in English-speaking countries, revealing that students can be given an opportunity to revisit their positionalities by writing their historical accounts of learning (Pavlenko, 2003; Park, 2011).

However, very few studies of writer identity in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings have been presented. Since the teaching of writing in EFL classrooms mainly sets an adaptation of written structures of English as the goal (Cimasko & Reichelt, 2011), issues of writing identity as well as writer identity gain little attention. In the EFL setting, especially in higher education, students try to cultivate their expertise and express it through writing. Students will have considerably different practices of writing between high school and higher education. Exploring the

way learners negotiate their identities while writing and construct their writer identity achieves a new insight into teaching writing in EFL settings.

This paper focuses primarily on how college-level Japanese EFL learners negotiate their identities of writing in English and explores how they construct their writer identities as well. First, this paper briefly reviews the issues of writer identity associated with the written discourse of English language learners. Next, my experiences of teaching writing in a college-level Japanese writing class were described as the catalyst to explore the present study. After the findings of the study, the implications for teaching writing are discussed to promote the research on writer identity in Japanese higher education.

1. Review of the Literature

Many studies indicate that discourses that L2 writers form are starkly different from those of native speakers (Belcher, 2009; Canagarajah, 2006; Horner, Lu, & Matsuda, 2011). Such discourses produced by L2 learners demonstrate the unique property which comprises the cultural values and assumptions of the writers (Canagarajah, 2006). Even though diversities of discourse should be legitimate from the perspectives of English as an international language or lingua franca, teaching writing is still geared to the requirements of dominant discourses of English, especially EFL settings (Matsuda & Friedrich, 2011). Hyland (2010) questions the conventional ways of literacy practice suitable for the specific fields or communities, as Scollon and Scollon (1981) advocated the concept of essayist literacy. Hyland (2010) claims that whereas the essayist literacy cultivates the ability to formulate the discourses conforming to the desired manners of the disciplinary discourse, the approach “involves anonymising themselves (students) and adopting the guise of a rational, disinterested, asocial seeker of truth” (p. 72).

Although writing is interwoven with the complexities of writer identities, research on exploring the constructions of identities by English language learners has been undertaken in EFL contexts. Since the teaching of writing in EFL settings mainly covers the prescriptive ways of the selected textbook, following the dominant discourse of English has become mainstream. Due to dealing with stable discourses, students often bother over self of who they are and their less prioritized ownership of the created discourse and text.

In order to explore writer's identity, Ivanič (1998) proposes the approach of an autobiographical self; “this aspect of identity is associated with a writer's sense of their roots, or where they (people) are coming from” (p. 24). Moreover, an autobiographical

self “captures the idea that it is not only the events in people’s lives, but also their way of representing these experiences to themselves which constitutes their current way of being” (p. 24). Research on writer identity or construction of identity has adopted the autobiographical narrative as the learners’ journey of self (Connely & Clandinin, 2000; Park, 2011). Park’s autobiographical project (2011) reveals various ways and processes to reconstruct identities of adult English language learners (ELLs) through autobiographical narratives of their linguistic and cultural experiences. Park advocates that autobiographical narratives give a space for students to revisit their language goal positionalities in the learning contexts.

In the next section, I will provide my snapshot of an autobiographical narrative which illustrates my experiences of teaching writing in my college to discuss the catalyst of exploring learners’ identities.

2. Autobiographical Narrative in Teaching Writing: From the Teacher’s Perspective

For me, writing itself as well as the teaching of writing is laborious. Since I started to teach English in higher education, I have been teaching a required writing course for the 1st year students for eight years. Reflecting on my past experiences of teaching writing, I realize that my writing approach in the past was almost identical to the mundane writing instruction in Japanese high schools. The instruction emphasized the “sentence-level” activities to meet my students’ expectations as well as to fit the students’ writing skills.

In the first semester, I did not ask the students to follow the fundamental writing structure: “introduction-body-conclusion.” Rather, I had students make more accurate sentences to complete one or two paragraphs. I felt that it seemed to be difficult for students to accomplish some writing tasks covering the fundamental structure of English writing. Thus, as the textbook that I had chosen provided some simple activities of paragraph writing, I encouraged students to get used to writing paragraphs with accurate competence in English. As mentioned, even though the students’ expectations were to further develop sentence-making skills with accuracy, I was aware that almost all of the Japanese English learners had never gone through process writing. Though students had worked linguistic and vocabulary development in order to deliver a good result in the exam-oriented tasks during their high school years, they did not express themselves in English freely nor did they practice writing in discursive ways. Thus, I had believed that the sentence-level approach was a great opportunity for students to shape their attitudes towards writing in English.

Yet, after teaching writing for a few years, I came to ask myself over and over

again; “Is it OK to continue teaching like this?” or “Should I teach an academic writing style going beyond the sentence-making activities?” After I taught the required writing course for two years, I tried to have the courage to change my teaching style in the classroom and goals of teaching writing. Even though the practices of paragraph writing were continued in the first semester, I attempted to link the instruction of paragraph writing to approaches for academic writing with the “introduction-body-conclusion” format. Of course, I changed the writing textbook to an academic reference written in Japanese. Fortunately, the writing textbook was appropriate enough to elucidate the characteristics of English academic writing in Japanese, especially argumentative writing; each section needed to be illustrated briefly (e.g. thesis statement in an introduction, topic sentences in the body part). Even though the text material did not show many scientific features, students had a good chance to understand the basic structure of academic writing in English as an initial step and to develop their confidence in English writing. Moreover, while students were making a draft of a paper, I mediated their process of writing, consulting some professional research articles or references of L2 writing (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Kroll, 2003; Silva & Matsuda, 2001, 2005): the way to provide some comments (Ferris, 2002, 2003), to manage the peer feedback activities (Goldstein, 2005), and make grammatical corrections (Truscott, 1999). I often wrestled with some problems of my teaching approach that I carried out and negotiated the potential ways of teaching writing in the classroom.

Especially, my experiences of coursework in a Ph.D. program in the United States further enhanced my potential of teaching writing in my teaching context. It was a great pleasure for me to gain the expertise of L2 teaching in order to consider the way in which I should incorporate more descriptive approaches for writing into the classroom. For the first few years, I followed the prescriptive ways of writing instruction such as grammar translations, acquiring students to improve the sentence-level skills with linguistic proficiency. After I finished my coursework in the graduate school and returned to my workplace, I have aimed to explore my own teaching of writing to commensurate with my college expectations and higher education. In addition, I try to have students shift their identities from just an English language learner or an EFL learner to a learner in an academy. Because language has a strong tie with identity (Norton, 2000; Hyland, 2009), writing per se contributes greatly to constructing a writer identity.

While I would like students to construct their academic identities through writing in English, I have wondered how students try to construct their identities, how they perceive themselves after they enter college, or what their positionalities are as

English language learners. To explore Japanese English language learners' processes of writing identities, I have decided to implement the autobiographical approach to elicit the writer's inner feelings as well as the meanings of writing in English in their learning context. The next section presents the way the present study was conducted through an autobiographical narrative approach.

3. Research Approach

This present study examined how college-level Japanese learners of English negotiate their identities of writing in English. To explore the research issue, this study employed autobiographical narrative as a qualitative approach. In a recent study, inquires of construction of learners' identities, the autobiographical narrative approach has drawn attention as a way to unveil students' insiders in detail (Park, 2011, 2012).

3-1. Participants

All participants were college-level students majoring in English in the Department of International Social Studies at Maebashi Kyoai Gakuen College and taking an elective course, *Second Language Literacy II* in the second semester (September-January) in the academic year 2012. A total of five Japanese female students in the course voluntarily agreed to participate in this present research: Sayuri, Yui, Emi, Momoka, and Sanae (all are under anonymity). Emi, Momoka, and Sanae are sophomores, and Sayuri and Erika are juniors studying in the English Program. According to their histories of learning English, most of them began to study English in junior high school (13 years old). They mostly emphasized grammar-translation activities and memorized lots of vocabulary presented in the textbook in junior high school. In high school, all of the participants had experiences of writing in English; however, they highlighted short-sentence makings with grammatical accuracy, and translating Japanese into English. Upon entering college, the participants learned paragraph writing using the basic written structures (introduction-body-conclusion) in various genres (argumentative, comparison, and short story).

3-2. Data Collection Procedure & Analysis

To understand the participants' actual experiences, processes, and practices of learning English in college in-depth, their autobiographical narratives written in English were collected. Due to the nature of using current students as research participants in this study, I took precautions to protect the participants' privacy. In following the proper procedures, I submitted the research protocol based on the research policies to the institution and received permission to conduct the present study. In addition, I asked each participant to sign a research consent form which explained the research purpose,

goal, and precautions of human rights.

I did a line-by-line analysis of the data gained from the autobiographies from the participants throughout as well as after data collection was done. Then, I attempted to reexamine the participants' narratives by discovering emerging themes pertaining to writer identity and the students' writing events. The following is a description of the five participants' snapshots illustrating narratives of writing experiences prior to and during college.

4. Findings

4-1. Emi's Case

When I was a high school student, I didn't have a chance to write in English. So, I thought the main of learning English was speaking, and writing English was not so important.

This type of statement is nothing unusual for Japanese students since writing instruction at the secondary school level in Japan emphasizes grammar translation; translating Japanese texts into English. Even though both speaking and writing are output skills, the position of speaking is more socially expected as a tool of communication rather than that of writing. After entering college, Emi has found the significance of writing in English. As Emi went through the practices of paragraph and essay writing in English, she has become aware of her writer identity:

Exploiting our grammatical knowledge that we have ever learned, we tried to make an essay or a journal following the fixed format. I felt a string gap of writing instruction between high school and college because my perception of "writing" is grammar work. In a writing class in college as I tried to make some essays or journals with the clear format, I found writing a practical skill.

In Emi's case, she has established her writer identity in English enhancing the practicality of writing in English. Emi had a lot of chances to write essays and journals in English based on the process-oriented approaches that she had never experienced in high school. Through such recursive practices of writing, Emi feels that the importance of writing proficiencies has the same authority as speaking skills. As Emi mentions, writing requires higher ability as a way to "show our feelings and opinions by writing" (Excerpted from Emi's autobiography).

4-2. Momoka's Case

Momoka had some experiences of writing in English when she was in high school. Her writing teacher offered a diary assignment, called “three-sentence diary” at every class. As this activity gave her a fresh meaning for writing, she became open to making English sentences with the grammatical issues that she learned. After entering the college, she has attempted to reconstruct her writer identity through producing more expressive essays in the required writing class. Even though expressing herself in English through writing tasks is a big difference to the writing activities in high school, such a practical learning of writing facilitates her process of writer identity.

In high school, I wrote only three sentences diary in English. In this college, I wrote some essays in English. I learned how to write essays along a specific theme.

Momoka captured some opportunities to write in English, however, she does not feel confident about her English writing. Her story illustrates that she often faces her problems of linguistic accuracy in writing. As her grammatical ability is improved, she will gain confidence in her English writing and establish writer identity further.

I am poor at English grammar, so I always worried about how to say in English. I can not write sentences in English positively. If possible, I wanted to avoid writing in English when I was a high school student. However, I want to improve my English skills to develop my English writing.

4-3. Sanae’s Case

Sanae tried to work on developing her grammar as well as vocabulary knowledge when she was in high school. Although she had a writing class, it was virtually a “grammar-translation” class, highlighting practices of making English sentences clearly. Sanae learned how to write English essays and has affirmed the significance of writing in English after being enrolled in college. But, Sanae conflicts with her construction of writer identity because it is difficult for her to trigger a positive response to English writing.

In high school, I learned the basic skills of English grammar and memorized a lot of vocabulary in high school. Then, when I entered the college, I learned to write in English since the writing class focused mainly on making paragraphs. I realized the strong differences of writing practice between high school and

college... To be honest, at this point, I do not have motivations towards and interests in English writing. Nor do I have fun to write in English. It seems that I try to write several writing tasks, just for a sense of “obligation” of achieving my work.

I really understand that writing itself is essential to improve my English skills as well as to exploit my writing skills in the globalized society. But, compared to speaking and reading, I cannot have a positive attitude of English writing, even though I have worked a lot. The reason for my negative attitude is that speaking or reading can be connected with my interests or communications with foreign people, but for me, writing adds much to my own benefits for the English development.

4-4. Sayuri's Case

According to her narrative of writing classes in high school, Sayuri did not have any class named “writing”. She had the English classes, called *General English I and II*, which covered integrated English skills such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing. In the class, the teacher assigned students to summarize the contents of paragraphs in English. Through completing the summary assignments, Sayuri found the meaning of writing in English in senior high school, understanding the accurate sentences that her classmates produced.

When I worked on the summary homework, it seemed to be really hard because the texts were long for me at that time. However I realized summarizing was to put the whole idea or meaning of the article or paragraphs in my brain... Also, other students' way of digesting paragraphs gave me a lot of things, for example, expressions and words which I had not known. I was impressed with other students' great jobs.

Through practices of writing in English in the class, Sayuri has realized the importance of coming into line of the conventional structures of English writing. As she describes, expressing her own ideas is crucial in writing as she writes in Japanese. Yet, her writing class highlighted the structure of writing in English, which led her to reform her way of thinking in her English writing.

In a high school, I spent much time learning grammar, memorizing words, and

reading articles. In spite of such experience, Hardly could I use them in my essays. In writing an essay in Japanese, I had thought the most important thing was how much I could convey my own ideas or opinions to readers. But this idea was changing through the writing class. Of course details about the theme of the writing are important, but to follow the form is more important. What teachers checked first was always whether or not our essay keeps the form correctly along with an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

Finally, Sayuri made a suggestion for promoting students' writer identity of English through the gaps of writing practices between high school and college. In Sayuri's case, she has already perceived her writer identity of English in a sense. However, she struggles to construct her identity further because of her having insufficient opportunities to practice English composition and having difficulties in applying her linguistic knowledge into writing in English. In order to heighten learners' writer identity, Sayuri believes that filling the gaps of teaching writing between high school and college contributes to obtaining an understanding of the importance of writing in higher education. As for her proposal, she addresses the acceleration of early steps into English composition in high school.

In my opinion, high school students have enough ability to write an essay, but they just make sentence... I still have a gap of English writing in high school. Students should have more chances to practice composition in English before they enter universities... High school students should also have chances to learn to write in the class with their much knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary.

4-5. Erika's Case

When Erika was a high school student, her activities in the writing class were to memorize the grammar knowledge and to answer the grammar questions for entrance exams to universities/colleges. In fact, Erika became interested in writing in English in her high school years, reflecting on her experiences of the writing class in high school. Erika states that she would have built her strong confidence in writing in English if she had had more essays or paragraph-making practice in writing class.

I tried to write an essay in this college for the first time... I had never tried to write an essay like that. I wanted to do it when I was a high school student. I

wanted to get knowledge how to write an essay in English. If students can have more practices of writing, many students may like to study English more because they can use their own English.

Furthermore, Erika has taken the classes for the teacher certificate to be an English teacher of junior/high school. From the professional views of teaching writing, Erika underscores the necessity of teaching writing in both a formal way and a communicative way as a current trend of teaching English in Japan. As an English learner as well as a pre-service teacher of English, Erika has reconstructed her writer identity, negotiating her past experiences of grammatical practices in high school and considering the appropriate approaches for writing instruction in high school based on her own thoughts of teaching writing.

5. Implications for Teaching Writing in Japanese Higher Education

Crafting learners' autobiographies encourages learners to reflect on themselves and to deepen their understanding of themselves as English learners as well as writers in English. This writing activity contributes to blending students' past and present into their future; what they are learning or how they are changing their identities and learning attitudes in the situated learning setting (Park, 2011). As Park's (2011) project of cultural and linguistic autobiography (CLA) clearly reveals, the autobiographical project offers students "opportunities to become agents of change via constructing their stories, sharing with one another, and developing strategies for themselves to bring about empowering changes in their lives" (p. 167-168).

Moreover, autobiographies which help learners construct the process of identities can shape the development of their emerging identities or "sense of self" in the learning context, negotiating and challenging the current social as well as educational conditions. Over the past decade, learners' background has been linguistically and culturally diversified in Japanese EFL settings. There is an increased number of students whose parents are non-native Japanese speakers since some companies in the local area have given an impetus to a foreign workforce. In my college, for instance, the population of students who are multilingual speakers (mainly Brazilians speaking the Portuguese language) has been growing (Gunma Prefecture, 2011). They use their native language, Japanese, and English as necessary. For the students, English is situated as an L2 or vernacular language rather than a foreign language. Nonetheless, they are considered as EFL learners along with Japanese learners of English. A dominant term, EFL, in applied linguistics or L2 education scholarship is conceived as a learning site in which students

who are ethically homogeneous and who have identical backgrounds learn English as a foreign language in the country. To challenge the persisting definition of EFL, the movement towards discussions on multilingualism education and pedagogy has become enlivening in EFL contexts (e.g., Europe).

As mentioned above, multilingualism in Japanese higher education has been developing due to the growth of population coming from foreign countries. There actually exist many students who use Japanese and English in their daily lives and in school. In such multilingualized environments, research on students who have diverse backgrounds utilizing autobiographical narratives offers a springboard for exploring (re)constructions of identities. Besides, inquiries of emerging identities of multilingual learners generate the pedagogical arguments for teaching writing in Japanese EFL settings in higher education. Such research outcomes encourage teachers to further contribute to the betterment of writing instruction which eyes the possibility of English as an international language, lingua franca, and World Englishes (Fujieda, 2012).

6. Conclusion

This paper explored constructions of writer's identities of Japanese EFL learners. The students negotiate their identities of writing in English and try to construct their writer's identities. In their high school year, the participants worked on more grammatical tasks rather than paragraph writing in writing classes. However, after they entered college, students have constructed their writer's identities, taking full into account the differentiations of writing practices between high school and college. Through various writing activities and tasks in higher education, students have formed their positionalities in higher education.

In EFL contexts, studies of writer's identities will be significant in order to take some clues to promote students' writer identities. Challenging the emerging terms such as "EFL" or "EFL writer," critical approaches for teaching writing will help teachers to find out the possibilities to have students construct their writers' identities in the specific learning settings.

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要旨

書き手のアイデンティティー構築を探求する

藤枝 豊

第二言語ライティング研究において、書き手のアイデンティティー形成を検証する事例が近年取り上げられている。学習者の自叙伝 (autobiography) を用いたこの研究は、特に英語圏の国々で盛んであり、学習者自身の「位置づけ」を再確認しながら、学習者がどのように「書き手」のアイデンティティーを形成するかを調査している。

英語圏における書き手のアイデンティティー形成の研究は多々発表されている一方、EFLの環境において、書き手のアイデンティティー形成の研究は皆無に等しい。その理由として、EFLにおけるライティング指導は、形式的な英語ライティング能力を身につけることを目的にしているためである。しかし、高等教育では、学習者は専門分野知識を養うために、ライティングを通じて専門能力を高める必要がある。書き手のアイデンティティー構築の研究は、学習者の専門能力を高めるためのライティング指導に重要な役割を果たす。

本研究は、日本人英語学習者5名が、自身の過去と現在のライティング経験を振り返り、書き手としてのアイデンティティー形成を検証する。また、本論文では、書き手のアイデンティティー構築をするための教育的意義を議論する。