

Using Reflective Writing as a Learner Tool in Discussion Class

Nicole Gallagher

ABSTRACT

This study examines the potential of using reflective writing activities as a tool to foster individual language learning in a communicative language classroom. As stated in Brown's (2007) principle of strategic investment, individuals can become successful language learners through investing time and effort in developing their own language learning strategies. This study proposes that written narratives can be used as a means for learners to develop awareness of language learning and become more personally invested in their learning process. Examining data collected from student reflective writing over the first semester of a university English discussion course, this article illustrates ways that language learners can use writing to reflect on their language learning experiences, and devise personalized goals and strategies for producing and understanding language. I conclude by suggesting that more research should examine the potential of using narrative reflection in second language learning classes.

INTRODUCTION

As much as language learning is a social endeavour, every person has her own personal experience of it. In the so-called 'narrative turn' that has taken place across various disciplines, much attention has been paid to how narratives are a useful form of inquiry of individual development. First, they can provide researchers access to individual experience. Narratives portray what learners are thinking and how they are thinking about it, providing a more holistic, embodied picture of cognition. Swain (2013) notes that "it is in narratives – anecdotes and stories of learners' experiences – that the centrality of emotion and its connections to cognition becomes evident" (p. 196). By appreciating both how students think and feel, we can have a better understanding of what motivates and drives students in the classroom. Second, "narrative tellings" (Swain et al, 2015) not only track individual development over time but are "sites of development themselves" (p. xiii). Through narrative expression, the individual can interpret and organize their own experience and consciously build their own understanding of it. In regards to learner narratives about second language learning, written reflection can help learners deepen their awareness of what they can and cannot do, and articulate their emotional experiences of producing and interacting in the L2.

Furthermore, encouraging students to narrate their own experiences can spur them to become more deeply invested in their own learning. Brown (2007) proposes that a principled approach to second language teaching should utilize the principle of strategic investment where success in language learning will be largely determined by "a learner's own personal 'investment' of time, effort, and attention to the second language" (p. 69). By taking time to reflect and structure their experiences into a written or spoken account, learners can devise their own personal strategies for language development.

This study outlines how reflective writing activities conducted in an L1 can complement other in-class strategies of goal-setting and provide opportunities for strategic investment in a second language classroom. The English Discussion Class at Rikkyo University is dedicated to developing fluency and English discussion skills for university students studying English as a foreign language (Hurling, 2012). One of the core features of the 14-week course is that it provides many opportunities to interact and practice speaking in English through topic-based discussion. For instance, in a given ninety-minute class of seven to nine pupils, students typically spend fifty

to sixty minutes of class time in spoken interaction. Another feature of the course is the opportunity for feedback on their discussion skills development – after students engage in discussions or language practice activities, the instructor provides teacher, pair, or group feedback sessions of various forms. For instance, instructors may provide students with check-sheets to assess their discussion skills, or question prompts to discuss with their classmates. While these in-class feedback activities have shown to be quite effective in enhancing student performance (Singh, 2015), motivation, and language goal setting (Wash, 2015), there are several limitations in using these types of feedback activities for developing strategic investment. First, these activities generally prohibit the use of the students' L1 and so, depending on their communicative abilities in their L2, students may be restricted quite narrowly in what they can express or articulate. Second, if the feedback activity involves interacting with peers or the teacher, it can pose some social risk of embarrassment in front of others. Some students may not feel comfortable speaking about their experiences with anxiety or nervousness with their classmates and perhaps may avoid the topic or not discuss it in detail. Finally, the feedback activities tend to focus on course content, and often do not provide opportunities for individuals to develop longer or more personal accounts of their experiences of language learning in class.

PROCEDURE

In the Spring semester of 2017, I implemented an end of class reflective writing activity in one class section of the English Discussion Class that I teach. The idea for this activity first originated in the Fall semester of 2016 based on my interests on subjective aspects of language learning, such as emotion and identity, and how these aspects intersect with the cognitive aspects of language learning. I devised the idea of an in-class reflection paper. I had two goals in mind – first, I wanted to explore how individual written reflection could support students in understanding their second language development. Second, I wanted to investigate how reflective writing could serve as a means for learners to develop their own individualized learning strategies.

There were several advantages I saw to using an in-class reflection paper. Although the students are aware that I read their reflections, this activity arguably provides a more personal space for students to express their thoughts and feelings about their progress in class. They could explore their emotional experiences of the class in greater detail without fear of losing face in front of their peers. As well, as the students were permitted to write in Japanese, they had a freer range of expression and the capacity to articulate their thoughts, feelings, and strategies more fully within the time constraints of the short activity. Finally, the general scope of the paper provides students with the choice on what they want to focus on – specific aspects on the course, their general development of English speaking ability, or their own personal strengths, achievements, or perceived limitations. Personalization could likely serve as a catalyst for students to set their own personal goals, which are meaningful to them according to their own understandings of their needs.

At the beginning of the semester, I monitored my classes for the first two weeks of lessons and chose four sections of low intermediate level students with which to pilot the activity. I thought the in-class reflection paper would be particularly useful for students without any prior or very little experience participating in discussion before as it would give them an opportunity to use written reflection to document their experiences learning how to conduct and participate in English discussions. At the end of the Week 3 lesson, the students received the activity handout (see Appendix), and were asked to answer the question, “What are your reflections on today’s class?” They were given three minutes to write their responses. I encouraged the students to write about anything they were thinking or feeling, especially if they had any worries or concerns. I also told them they could choose whether to write in Japanese or English. Almost all students elected to

write in Japanese.

After the pilot week, I transcribed the papers that belonged to the four class sections and then selected one class section for the remainder of the study. By narrowing the project to only one class, I aimed to be able to tailor the reflection paper activity to the specific needs of one particular group of learners by having the flexibility to adapt the reflection questions based on my own observations as the semester progressed. I selected the class for several reasons. First, I had a good rapport with them, and they got along well with one another. The students also demonstrated a desire to learn and improve their English skills and so I thought they would perhaps take the opportunity of the writing activity more earnestly than some students in other classes. Finally, there was a wide range of personality types in the class – from shy, hesitant, nervous students to very extroverted, and cheerful students. I was interested in examining how different individual personality types might diversify the outcome of the activity.

In line with other qualitative researchers (Miyahara, 2016; Mann, 2011), I took a reflexive attitude towards the evolution of the classroom activity study. Miyahara (2016) describes reflexivity as an “ongoing self-awareness” (p. 90) that results in “greater sensitivity to subjectivities of both the researcher and the participant” (p. 90). Rather than set a schedule for the in-class reflection papers in advance, I determined when to use the activity during the semester through a process of observing the students and making notes in a teacher’s journal. This also could help me make my assumptions about the project more explicit (Miyahara, 2016). By applying a flexible schedule, I wanted to maximize the utility of the writing activity for the students as much as possible. I was also wary of using it in every week’s lesson as I did not want the activity to become too repetitive or tedious. In the end, I elected to use the in-class reflection paper six times during the semester and posed different questions I asked them to reflect on as the course progressed. I selected which aspects of the class based on my notes and observations of the class. For example, in Week 5, after completing their first Discussion Test, I asked the students to reflect on their progress so far. In Week 7, I observed that the material and content aims were particularly challenging, so I asked them to reflect on how the day’s class went. I decided to use the classroom activity with different types of lessons – regular lessons, discussion test lessons, review lessons that occurred one week prior to the discussion test, and the final lesson in Week 14 - so that students could consider their experiences and progress at different points of the semester. By allowing the schedule of the study be created through a reflexive decision making process, I made efforts to remain sensitive to the needs of students.

VARIATIONS

An in-class reflection paper could be modified in numerous ways for a variety of class contexts and pedagogical purposes. I will outline several modifications: writing in L1 versus L2 language, in-class writing versus out of class writing, and a private diary versus a diary read by others.

The outcomes of doing written reflection in an L1 or L2 could vary depending on the group of learners. For my project, I selected a class section that was categorized as a Level III discussion class, which meant that the students had scored between 280 and 480 on the TOEIC test before being enrolled in the course at the beginning of the semester. I decided to give the students the choice of whether to write in English or Japanese since the students may have felt their English level was not advanced enough to adequately express their ideas in English. As well, there was limited time given in class to conduct the activity so they needed to write their ideas quickly. While writing reflections on L2 language learning in an L1 may have several advantages, if the teacher wants to read the papers, it would require that she has reading proficiency in that language. Alternatively, if the teacher decides to pursue a reflective writing activity in the L2, she should keep in mind that students would be faced with a more limited range of linguistic expression. In

order to support students in their L2 writing, the instructor may want to provide some prompts or models as scaffolding. However, this might affect the outcome of the papers by either narrowing the range of topics, or imposing stylistic constraints on the students.

When deciding whether to carry out this project in or out of class, there are several things a teacher should consider. One advantage of using an in-class paper is that the experiences of participating in English discussion will be fresh in the minds of students and so this could make it easier to recall their experiences or emotions. However, the students are only given a few moments to prepare their ideas and there may not be a lot of time to dedicate to a reflective writing activity. On the other hand, if students can do a reflection paper at home, they could not only have the time to write more but would have the advantage of reflection. In the case of an out-of-class activity, the instructor may want to set some guidelines or parameters to ensure that the purpose of the activity is conveyed to the students. Some possible disadvantages to a take home reflection paper are that students may not dedicate adequate time to the activity, may forget some key details of the class, or may forget to do the assignment.

When designing the in-class reflection paper, I considered several iterations. One idea was to have the activity take the form of a personal diary that no one but the student saw. I ultimately decided not to use this as a model because I wanted to be able to read what the students were writing in order understand what the students were experiencing, and discern the effectiveness of the writing activity. Yet, I knew that by reading the papers, I would have inadvertently had an influence on their content, although this would be considered positive or negative. For instance, one possible effect of reading student reflection papers as a teacher is that they may be writing for the benefit of the teacher, and it may shape how they write their narrative more than if they writing for themselves, or for their classmates, or for a blog. A possible alternative might be to have students exchange papers with each other, and this could provide opportunities for them to discuss their experiences with one another. However, having the students share with each other might limit what they discuss if the content was potentially embarrassing for them to talk about with their peers.

DISCUSSION

At the outset of this study, it was difficult to predict how the students would respond to this activity and whether it would be effective as a way to improve strategic investment in my class. While narrative expression can arguably be used as a tool to assist language learners to become more self-aware, process and articulate experiences, and devise strategies for improvement (Swain et al, 2015), I was not sure if this activity would successfully achieve all or any of these outcomes. The data discussed below was collected from eight first-year university students enrolled in the Spring semester of the English Discussion Class at Rikkyo University. The students wrote in Japanese and I translated the original text into English and had it cross-checked by several bilingual colleagues. Examining the students' reflection papers on their own, the data suggests that students used the opportunity to explore some of their experiences and articulate strategies, and establish learning goals. In fact, it seems that students were sometimes able to articulate goals and strategies unprompted by the activity or myself. While further studies are necessary to confirm these findings, the data of this study provides support for the benefits of using written reflection as a tool for heightening learner self-awareness and providing opportunities for learning strategy development.

In the following sections, I will first examine how the students articulated their language learning process and how they devised learning strategies for themselves. Finally, I will discuss how this activity also helped me to recognize the perspectives and challenges of the individual students in the class.

Articulating the Language Learning Process, Goal-setting and Strategy Development

In this section, I will begin by discussing the students' responses to the question, "What are your reflections on today's class?" that was posed in Week 3. As novices to discussion, it is probably not much of a surprise that the prevailing thought expressed about the discussion class in all of the students' first reflection papers was "it's difficult". In their papers, the students formulated some hypotheses why discussion was challenging for them. Several students suggested that they lacked prior experience with discussion and speaking in English. One student lamented that they could not put the grammar and vocabulary knowledge they had acquired in high school to use in their discussions, "I think the reason is I don't know many vocabulary words and I cannot say the grammar I learned in high school in the moment". Another student expressed that it was very difficult to convey her ideas clearly to her partner in order to be understood. While everyone reported having the same opinion about the course, each student inferred different reasons.

After considering the students' written reflections, I noted in my teacher's journal that I would refrain from using the reflection paper activity in Week 4 so that the students could focus on improving their discussion skills and prepare for the upcoming discussion test in the following week. In Week 5, after the students completed their discussion tests, I suggested they could write about how it went or how they felt about their progress in the course so far. It seemed that by this point in the course some students had drawn some conclusions on ways to participate successfully in discussion. One student recognized an effective strategy for approaching English discussion in the class, "I realized that in this class we must actively speak in English, so even if I can't speak well, for now I have the confidence to speak out with the words that I know". Another student wrote that she sometimes had difficulty understanding what others were saying but she described her own way for dealing with it. First, she would listen to her discussion partner, check that she understood, and then ask them a question. By doing this, she felt she could manage to participate in discussion despite comprehension difficulties. A few students noted some achievements – one student said she felt their vocabulary had increased, another student said she had gotten better at thinking about how to use English to express her ideas rather than Japanese, and another said she felt she knew how to keep the discussion going now through a process of catch-ball. A couple of students articulated goals for future discussions, "I want to get better at asking more probing questions to make the discussion go deeper" and humorously, "I want to improve my English speaking to at least a high school level". In conclusion, by the fifth week of the course and the second reflection paper, the students were able to describe strategies they were using, state achievements so far, and some even set their own goals.

In Week 7, I noted in my journal that the class was perhaps more difficult than usual for two reasons. The discussion topics - the environment and being eco-friendly - were less familiar to some, and the students were studying how to use examples to support their ideas – a topic that has proven more difficult in the past than the language functions of opinions and reasons that come before it. Indeed, the students expressed their difficulties in the reflection papers. A few students commented specifically on the topic, "I had difficulty knowing how to express my thoughts about the more abstract topic discussed in the second half of class". Another example: "as for today's topic of eco-friendly, it was difficult for me to think of ideas and ways to be kinder to the environment, and when I tried to express my ideas in English, I couldn't think of the words I needed". Finally "I couldn't have had a smooth discussion with this week's topic without thinking about my ideas beforehand". The more abstract, unfamiliar topic seemed to demonstrate to some of the students the limitations of their spoken vocabulary. Two other students wrote about the difficulty of using examples, "I thought today's class felt more difficult than usual because we had to think about how to differentiate between reasons and examples", and "It's very difficult to understand the unclear border between reasons and examples". Despite these difficulties, one

student talked about her appreciation for the cooperation of others in the class, “everyone is kind and I am really happy that everyone works hard to try and understand my idea”. Of the six students that were present, one student articulated some goals and a study strategy for future classes, “I would like to be able to take less time to put my ideas together and participate in the discussion without having to quit something I want to say. The phrases are getting longer and the types of phrases are increasing, so I want to try my best to memorize them so that I can use them accurately in discussion”. In the written reflection activity, this student was able to articulate some goals that she has to improve her discussion skills, and a strategy for coping.”

The next time we used the in-class reflection paper was in Week 9, after the second Discussion Test of the semester. I posed the question, “How do you feel about today’s Discussion Test?” and I asked them to reflect on how it compared to the first Discussion Test. All eight of the students present described some improvement since the previous test, either through being able to ask more questions, use more phrases naturally, respond to others’ questions, or state their opinions clearly. However, several students noted that they felt they lacked vocabulary, or the skills to use English grammar correctly. For example, one student wrote, “I wasn’t able to use correct grammar while speaking. As well, I couldn’t recall English vocabulary right away so I often got stuck and couldn’t say anything.” Another student commented, “In the end, because I lack vocabulary, I often had trouble while speaking. I want to fix this problem in the future”. By Week 9 and the second Discussion Test, it seemed that students felt they were acquiring some skills required for discussion and understanding better how to participate in English discussion, but at least some felt frustration with their ability to express themselves using appropriate vocabulary and grammar. This seemed to encourage students to articulate a desire to learn more grammar and vocabulary. Unfortunately, few students fell short of expressing strategies for improving these skills. For example, one student wrote, “when I was trying to discuss, sometimes I would forget grammar and could only arrange some vocabulary words together, so I would like to be able to speak using correct grammar.” A few other goals were stated in the Week 9 papers. For example, “I would like to be able to speak without using Japanese English and use even longer phrases.” This could suggest that some students were able to maintain motivation to improve their English speaking skills, through the experiences of the course.

In Week 12, the students had to prepare for their final Discussion Test in the following week by reviewing all of the function phrases and communication skills they had learnt throughout the semester. At the end of the class, I asked them to write their reflection papers on the question, “How do you feel about your ability to have a discussion in English?”. Students mostly reflected on their achievements, or goals for improving their English speaking and discussion abilities, while a few students commented on their limitations. One student talked about increasing their vocabulary size, “Even though it is just a small improvement, I have increased the number of vocabulary words I can use in discussion”. Several students talked about how they were able to develop the courage or confidence to speak in English through taking the English Discussion Class. One student remarked, “Most of all, I have developed the courage to speak”. Another student explained, “In the beginning, since I didn’t know how to convey my ideas, I didn’t have the courage to say my opinion, but if I try to say something, I learned that others can understand me. Because of this, I could speak a number of times without feeling nervous”. Some of the students were able to set some goals for future improvements. For example, “I cannot use questions unless they are fixed expressions, so I would like to deliberately try to use original questions”. Another student reflected on her difficulties and expressed a desire to improve, “I often cannot think of the right words and phrases that I had planned to use. I want to try to be careful not to forget these things when I am speaking.”

Other Benefits of the In-Class Reflection Paper

One unintended outcome of this activity that had a positive effect on my teaching, and perhaps the classroom was my enhanced awareness of the perspectives and feelings of the individual learners in my class. Since I was reading the students' personal reflections that they had written in Japanese, I was able to gain a much better appreciation for their individual efforts than I could in my other classes. Perhaps partly owing to the language barrier, and partly due to the educational culture and social roles of teacher and student, learner perspectives are often muted and are sometimes gleaned by the teacher through observation rather than direct communication between student and teacher. In fact, it was an enjoyable and fulfilling experience for me to read their reflections. By reading, and in a sense, listening to what my students were expressing, I could better understand their unique personalities and empathize with their struggles in the class. Swain (2013) describes that by attending to the emotional expressions of our students, is that through listening we can learn to recognize our students' emotions and knowing when and how to intervene. While it was not a focus of the study, I would argue that this activity had the unintended effect of improving my teaching through heightening my sensitivity to the needs of the individual learners in the class.

CONCLUSION

This study offers support that written reflection encourages students to articulate their experiences and become more self-aware, and has potential to support learners in developing personalized goals and strategies. As this was a pilot study of using reflective writing activities in an English Discussion class, further studies could be pursued to more fully understand the potential of using reflective writing as a learner tool. For instance, while students often wrote about their achievements, limitations, goals and strategies, not all students were able to include all of these elements in their papers. In future iterations of this activity, I think it could be useful to provide more guidance for their reflective writing so that the learners can receive the optimal benefits from the activity. Teachers might ask students to be more explicit on sharing goals or strategies to reach those goals. There is a lot of potential for using reflective writing in class, and I hope other teachers explore the benefits of using reflective narratives in their classes.

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APPENDIX

Name: _____
____/____/2017

Date:

In-Class Reflection Paper

Both Japanese and English are ok.

日本語もしくは英語(両方でも可)で記入してください。

What are your reflections on today's class?

今日 の 授 業 の 感 想 は ど う で す か ?
