Dimensions of Extensive Writing

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It is suggested that extensive writing (EW), in which students write relatively large quantities of English, typically online, may be a good way to boost learners' total quantity of output and to improve fluency. It is further suggested that it is particularly suited to Japanese tertiary contexts, where learners often have very limited contact hours and where previous learning experiences have been heavily weighted towards input and towards accuracy, possibly alongside extensive reading (ER). The author's experiences are presented and discussed, and various ways of implementing EW are introduced, with discussion of the dimensions along which these might be analyzed. Some attention is given to theoretical considerations, particularly in relation to curricular balance and the roles of output and input.

Extensive writing（EW、量書き学習法）を紹介する。EWとER（Extensive Reading、量読学習法）の相似点および相違点を入力と出力の観点から探り、また EW の役割をカリキュラムのバランスの観点から考える。実践上の例を紹介し、分析する。

Introduction

Waring (2002) suggests that typical Japanese university freshmen's experience of learning English has been heavily skewed towards accuracy-focused input, and has largely neglected the other three modes essential for a balanced curriculum: accuracy-focused output, and fluency-focused input and output. Earlier research (Lavin & Beaufait, 2003) has assumed that shifting the balance heavily towards output would be highly beneficial for tertiary students in Japan, and has explored to some extent how this might be done.

Since in most Japanese tertiary settings, at least with non-English majors, English language contact time is very limited, some way has to be found of instituting practice outside of class. Extensive writing (EW) is the way suggested, as it has a number of advantages over speaking practice: it is easier for the teacher to monitor and assess; students have more chance to reflect before committing themselves to output; and if time in class is

largely committed to speaking practice, writing outside of class introduces a further element of balance into the curriculum. (In the author's case, prior to the introduction of EW as described, writing tasks in freshman English courses were limited to one or two per semester, due to the demands of other elements of the English program.)

Details of the author's initial implementations of EW, together with a lengthier discussion of the justification therefore and of the results, are available in Lavin & Beaufait (2003). The primary aim of the present paper is to discuss options in implementation of EW, with some analysis of the dimensions along which these may vary. A secondary aim is to relate the practice of EW with certain theoretical issues, and implications of ER in relation to input, output, and notions of curricular balance are discussed briefly.

What is extensive writing?

EW is, trivially, writing extensively. The term is obviously reminiscent of extensive reading (ER). As with ER, it is assumed that quantity is a key consideration. EW is also similar to ER in that it aims for fluency and enjoyment. It is, however, different from ER in one key respect: it is concerned with output rather than input.

According to Swain & Lapkin (1995), output generates rather different cognitive processes from those generated by input and encourages learners to notice syntactic features and consequently, given suitable conditions, improve their output. Izumi (2003) proposes a psycholinguistic mechanism by which this might occur: he suggests that the human comprehension system is interactive and compensatory in nature and that these

characteristics can hinder language development, whereas production and monitoring of that production can lead to consciousness raising, which creates the ideal condition for progress. Zamel (1992) suggests that writing can foster reading skills, and Harklau (2002) calls for a greater role for writing in ESL and EFL classrooms, suggesting that language learning takes place through writing and further that learners' writing provides us with an underexploited source of evidence into learning processes.

The concern with quantity springs from the finding that "grammatical aspects of students' writing seem to improve more from regular practice than they do as a result of having errors corrected" (Truscott, 1996). EW could include practices such as writing a journal in a notebook, but in this paper the definition is restricted to writing extensively online, which would appear to have a number of advantages.

Writing in a notebook for evaluation entails some kind of collection mechanism, with students, for example, bringing their notebook to class every week to hand in to the teacher. Switching to an online medium, particularly something like a bulletin board system (BBS), means that the writing is instantly and permanently (in principle) available to the teacher. With online writing, students' output can be automatically archived in machine-readable form. This facilitates later analysis that can potentially lead to improved teaching methods in later classes, and also automatic word-counting in courses with explicit quantity targets. (This is admittedly an advantage shared with methods such as requiring submission in word-processor files.) Another practical advantage is that computer-mediated communication (CMC) has the desirable side effect of supplementing the often inadequate computer training provided

through the usual channels for students not majoring in information technology fields; as tertiary institutions are called upon to cater for non-traditional students (part-time, distance learning, etc.), it may become essential to provide regular class content online, and teachers would do well to prepare for that day in some small way.

Other advantages are connected with classroom dynamics, motivation, and the kinds of interaction desired. Students in large, mixed-major classes often speak only to close friends, while in CMC they typically address a wider range of people, and this can be assumed to have a positive affect on class atmosphere. Classroom dynamics are altered in another beneficial way, as the proportion of total contributions accounted for by students increases (Kamhi-Stein, 2000). In most cases, CMC is a social mode of operation and there is ample evidence that it enables greater quantity (see, for example, Braine & Yorozu, 1998), a defining characteristic of writing extensively. Finally, in teaching contexts where students have large quantities of homework to do in various subjects, a measure of flexibility is desirable. In CMC, students can contribute to a discussion or other kind of exchange at any time, and there is potentially ample stimulus to do so, as they have access to the output of other students. A contribution can be lengthy or as short as one word. Thus, though written CMC enables reflection before output, it also has the advantage of encouraging spontaneity. Arguably, for students with low confidence or low ability, it is also a less stressful means of active participation. Students can increase their output up to any teacher-specified or self-imposed goal through frequent participation as opposed to writing longer and more difficult contributions. This can be contrasted with, for example, traditional journal writing, where a student would probably be embarrassed to write only "I love the 'Matrix'" as a single entry: this is presumably largely because in non-social modes context can only be provided by oneself, whereas in CMC it is often provided by other people.

Possible advantages of traditional journal writing include the convenience and portability of pen and paper: dedicated students could write very short contributions in spare moments, irrespective of the availability of networked computers. As computers become more widely available, at least in tertiary settings, this advantage is likely to become less pronounced, though it is undeniable that paper is an attractive medium in this regard. Further, the spontaneity associated with online media may tend to discourage certain kinds of writing, particularly those requiring careful composition with great attention to linguistic accuracy. This by no means constitutes an argument against EW as described, but does support the commonsense notion that, as far as time allows, teachers may do well to introduce a variety of activities, via a variety of media, to students.

What media are suited to CMC?

Media that can be used for CMC include the following: chat, email, mailing lists (email groups); BBS, weblogs (blogs), and wikiwikis (or wikis; see Leuf & Cunningham, 2001). These can be differentiated along three significant dimensions: synchronicity, number relations, and direction.

Synchronicity refers to the speed of response that is typically expected of the reader(s) or recipient(s) of a message. Chat, for example, is a synchronous medium, as the lack of an almost instantaneous response typically prompts a further question or comment from the original contributor or an answer or

comment from a third participant. Email is a prototypical asynchronous medium, as even a "please reply without delay" message assumes that the message will take a measurably long period of time to arrive, to be opened by the recipient, and to be replied to. Number relations can be singular or plural at either end. Email is typically a one-to-one medium, while a traditional mailing list, such as Tomorrow's Professor (http://sll. stanford.edu/projects/tomprof/newtomprof/index.shtml), or a website might be seen as a one-to-many medium, an online poll assignment as many-to-one (students send their work to the teacher), and chat as many-to-many. Email is a push medium, in the sense that a reader can see only what has explicitly been sent to his or her mailbox; by contrast, chat is a pull medium where only people who explicitly choose to log-in or register can take part and see other contributions.

The author tends to favor a BBS because this medium accords with his preferences along these three dimensions: it is asynchronous, and therefore students can reflect before contributing, or posting, and can post at times that are convenient for them; it is essentially a many-to-many medium that encourages participation from everyone, and provides some leeway regarding what to say and to whom to address posts; it is a pull medium, and the very fact of pulling may encourage a stronger feeling of participation and community.

It is worth noting the phenomenon of convergence, as the developers of one medium seek to incorporate the perceived advantages of another. Yahoo! Groups (http://groups.yahoo. com/), for instance, has its origin in the mailing list concept, yet it is typically implemented as a many-to-many medium (everyone can post to everyone) and has a pull option (subscribers can access mails on the web instead of or in addition to receiving them via email). Many BBSs (e.g. ezboard, see below) also include an option to be informed by email when a new message has been posted, and some (e.g. Moodle, see below) even optionally send the whole text of the post, thus partially changing the medium into one of a push nature.

The literature on the use of blogs and wikis in EFL is so sparse that it is difficult to come to any conclusions regarding the types of interaction that they encourage and their advantages and disadvantages vis-à-vis other media. A brief description of these comparatively recent media and some brief remarks on possible applications thereof are in order here. Tentatively, it may be surmised that a blog would serve well as a journal. It would differ from a paper-based journal in that it would be available online for others to read freely. A wiki, by contrast, is designed for collaborative composition and casual editing. It is an attractive option for group- or whole class-based compositions. A potential problem is that a conventional wiki is configured by default to be edited anonymously and without limits, which could lead to inadvertent or malicious deletion of files (though these are generally recoverable by administrators), and the difficulty in evaluating individuals involved in a project. Examples of work composed on a wiki are at the Write Japan site (http://www-clc. hyper.chubu.ac.jp/oguri/japan/write_jpn.html).

Choice of BBS

BBSs generally fall into one of three categories: full-featured commercial, low-cost commercial, and open source. In the former category are *Blackboard* (http://www.blackboard.com) and *WebCT* (http://www.webct.com), which are commonly used for distance learning components of courses at tertiary institutions or for company intranets. Low-cost commercial

BBSs such as *The Forum Company* (http://www.forumco.com), *StereoDreamScene* (http://www.stereodreamscene.co.uk), and *ezboard* (http://www.ezboard.com) typically cost around $10 or less for a month and feature many esthetic interface enhancements but less robust archiving and security features than the first category. *PhpBB* (http://www.phpbb.com/) and *moodle* (http://moodle.org/; see, e.g. Hinkelman, 2003) are examples of open source packages. These are typically provided gratis but presuppose a certain level of expertise and a web server on which to host them; alternatively, the user can obtain use of the software gratis but pay instead for hosting and maintenance and support.

Implementations

The author has in the past favored *ezboard*. This BBS is fairly inexpensive and has a wide choice of color schemes and other interface enhancements that have proved to be popular with students. For the teacher, the automatic counting of contributions by individuals and the ability to assign custom titles (for example *Group Leader*, or *Advanced User*—or should the need arise *Galactic Emperor*) to users automatically based on their number of contributions are particularly attractive features. This latter feature has proven to be a great motivator for students, as they notice their status compared to other students and often compete to reach higher levels faster.

More recently, the author has switched to *moodle*, hosted at *OpenSourceHost* (http://www.opensourcehost.com/), as the cost of hosting a number of separate bulletin boards over an extended period of time is rather lower and board owners are able to alter configurations easily. (It should be noted that *moodle* is actually a complete content/course management system (CMS) but this discussion is restricted to its bulletin board facility). In addition, registration proved to be a much simpler process than with *ezboard*.

The concept of a bulletin board is not a difficult one to grasp. Someone (usually a teacher in the early stages) starts a discussion with a post. Some examples are: "What did you do last weekend?", "What are your hobbies?", "What movies do you like?", "What was your favorite graded reader this semester?", and "Please tell everyone about your project work, and ask each other questions about theirs."

Worthy of mention here are two dimensions of variation that should be considered when using a bulletin board. The first few examples above are typically non-integrated exchanges, i.e. their purpose is to increase the total volume of writing and to facilitate communication amongst class members, rather than to contribute towards some other central objective of the course. Probably every kind of class BBS can benefit from this kind of discussion, particularly in the early stages where it can be an ideal way for members to get to know each other. For groups of students with similar hobbies it can be beneficial to create forums such as Music or Soccer for use throughout, and even after, a course, and these provide a low-tension opportunity for written practice in English and useful gains in total quantity.

The latter examples, by contrast, are clearly aimed at complementing or furthering something that has already happened in class, and can therefore be termed integrated exchanges. The graded reader example can help learners recall the books they have read or alert other learners to books that they may not yet have noticed or been attracted by. Learners could be asked to post difficult sentences from the book in

question, prompting noticing of and reflection on lexical or grammatical features. Thus, this kind of exchange can serve as a kind of linked practice and provide opportunities for recycling and layering. The final example is one that the author uses in his ESP classes for science majors. After giving presentations on a chosen topic in their field of specialization in class, students are expected to discuss their topics, volunteering information, giving information in response to questions, and eliciting information by asking questions. The reinforcement this affords serves as the gateway to the next stage, creating a website to introduce the topic to the general public.

(This distinction between integrated and non-integrated exchanges should probably not be overstated, particularly in freshman general English courses, where a central objective may be precisely to enable students to talk freely about themselves, including what they did at the weekend. The EW component of the course may then serve as an opportunity for preview, review, and supplementation: students have a chance to reflect on subjects to talk about in class, and practice the necessary language beforehand, as well as to review, and hopefully improve, what they have previously said, in addition to writing what they didn't have time to say in class.)

Another dimension is that of quality-quantity. This could of course incorporate actual evaluation of writing accuracy, e.g. grammar, but I am here referring to the use of quantitative measurements to promote certain desired behaviors or for purposes of assessment. As an example, the author has found from time to time that students fail to grasp the idea that a forum is intended to facilitate communication between students and tend to direct all their messages to the instructor. In these cases, he has told students that for a certain period of time

all replies to other students will be counted as 1.5 messages rather than 1 message. Students tend to respond by writing to each other more frequently, initially to increase their score, but afterwards because they have understood the attractions of this kind of interaction. On another occasion, students were very happy to discuss topics like movies, music, and soccer with limited numbers of students with similar interests, but were reluctant to contribute to integrated discussions or to contribute to discussions with the whole class. A disproportionate number of messages were extremely short, for example "Me, too!", meaning that some students had very impressive message totals, although they had actually written very little. On this occasion, students were told that they could double the word count of any integrated contributions they made. This had the immediate effect of encouraging long and thoughtful posts on their project work. At the same time, a more inclusive classroom dynamic was encouraged by counting any question directed at someone with whom the poster had never before communicated directly within the forum as 2 messages.

These measures may be termed quality-quantity conversions (QQC), as they evaluate not only total quantity, the main yardstick of EW, but also various qualitative factors, numerically. Though they may be seen by some as overly obtrusive or manipulative, they may also be regarded as honest, since at the end of the semester or year we usually are obliged to evaluate students in overtly or indirectly numerical terms: if we communicate the exact terms of these mechanisms to students, greater predictability in grading becomes possible. Taking this principle to its extreme, the author introduced an *ezboard* index into some of his classes to evaluate holistically the performance of each student. Factors that should be taken into account in this index include: total number of words contributed; total

number of posts contributed; temporal distribution of posts (in particular, it is intended that students who posted all or most of their contributions at or near the end of the course should be penalized); degree of integration of posts; distribution of posts as regards addressee (related to class dynamics). The number of messages and number of lines as recorded by students in many cases reflects various QQCs introduced at various stages in the course. For raw quantity, custom titles are best used. To calculate temporal distribution it is necessary to take quantitative measurements at a number of points in the semester or year. Taking all these factors into account, one version of the ezboard index used by the author was:

$$l + 2m + t1 + t2 + t3,$$

where l is the number of lines, m is the number of messages (both of these adjusted according to previous QCCs), and tn is the custom title, converted to a positive integer, after n months.

Conclusion

It is argued that there is a case for writing to play a larger role in the Japanese tertiary curriculum and that the model introduced here, EW, is a useful way of introducing this change and increasing student output. Further research is required on optimal ways of implementing EW and on the appropriate weight that should be accorded to it in the curriculum.

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