Looking in at process writing through student journals

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Every EFL teacher who has taught writing knows about the process writing approach. What we don't always know is what students think about it and how they process each step in their minds. Basing our approach on an article by Dorothy Zemach (2007), we look at student journal entries to find out what students discovered about process writing and how they coped with it, from brainstorming and organizing to peer editing and revising. These journals were written by Japanese university students in three university writing classes comprising different skill levels, and were meant to serve as personal feedback loops for students to gauge their understanding of the process (with teacher feedback whenever the journals indicated a need). As students received instructions and opportunities to practice the process writing approach, they wrote their thoughts, concerns, and assumptions about the success and effectiveness of each step. We draw some conclusions about the role these journals played in helping students reflect on their thought processes as they engaged in process writing.

　EFL環境でライティングを教える教師はプロセスライティングアプローチについての知識を有している。よくわからない点は、学生が心の中でそれについて感じていることや各ステップをどのように処理しているかである。Zemach(2007)の論文をもとに、我々は学生がジャーナルに書いていることを調べ、ブレインストーミング、オーガナイジング、ピアエディティング、リバイジングといったプロセスライティングについて学生が何を発見しどう対処したかを調査した。日本の大学で複数のレベルからなる3つのライティングクラスの学生が書いたジャーナル(それに対して教師フィードバックが毎回なされた)が、プロセスについての理解を図る個人的なフィードバックループとしての役割を果たした。学生はプロセスライティングアプローチを学習するための指導や機会を与えられており、各ステップの出来ばえや効果について自分が考えたこと、困ったこと、思ったことを記入した。学生がプロセスライティングに従事する際、自分たちの思考プロセスに関してじっくり検討する助けとなってくれるこれらのジャーナルが果たす役割に関しての結論をいくつか述べた。

CHALLENGING
LOOKING IN
LOOKING OUT
ASSUMPTIONS

The process of process writing

As teachers, we often wonder what our students are thinking about when they're learning English. What are their thought processes as they attend our classes and hopefully have new learning experiences? We pondered this question, as well as others, in writing classes that we teach at a Japanese university. In these classes, we used the process writing (PW) approach to teach them writing. For some students, it was the first time for them to be exposed to this way of thinking. In order for us to get a closer look at their thoughts, we asked them to write journals after each step of the process, from brainstorming to the final draft. This paper will describe our process of looking in at the steps our students took to write compositions in English. We describe the research questions we asked, provide the rationale for our study, and show examples of student journal entries which highlight the answers we sought.

Research questions

1. Do journals reflect increased understanding of process writing over time?

2. Do journals serve the same purpose over time for students?

3. Which stage of process writing was helped most by journals?

First, in the writing classroom utilizing the process writing approach, students are expected to understand and get accustomed to what they should do in each step of the process as they continue writing. Research question 1 asks how well student journals reflect student's awareness of the PW approach as they progress.

Second, journals are intended for students' reflection on what they did, thought, or wrote in each step during the course of time. In our assumption, however, this repetitive process of journal writing may serve different purposes at different times. Research question 2 came out of this assumption.

Third, students may naturally have different impressions toward each step of PW. Students may enjoy one step but not another. Journals may help them at one step but possibly not at another step. Research question 3 asks which step appears to be the most rewarding to students.

Background on process writing approach

Since the PW approach has become widespread among EFL teachers in Japan, we wanted to know more about how our students felt and viewed this process. Most Japanese university students do not know much about this approach to writing, so we wanted to show them what it was and guide them through each step. We wanted our students to understand how the process of writing an essay evolved, rather than merely focusing on the final product. In addition, we wanted to show them that writing was not an isolated skill, and that it was necessary to use the other skills of speaking, listening, reading, and of course thinking, to achieve the goal of writing an essay or paragraph.

This type of approach was a new, exciting, and perhaps unusual experience for many students. For this reason, we wanted to find out how they viewed each step and their

reactions. The next question was to determine which steps of the PW approach to focus on in the journals. Some PW proponents cite as many as 13 stages (White and Arndt, 1991:7; cited in Caudery, 1997, p. 11) that writers go through to complete a final piece of writing. We, however, decided to narrow it down more and looked at these six steps, based on similar research by Zemach (2007):

- Brainstorming – students learned about several different ways to generate ideas, including listing, clustering or mind-mapping, and freewriting.

- Organizing – students learned how to organize their brainstorming notes by writing outlines and supporting their main ideas with details.

- First draft – students wrote a first draft of their essay or paragraph based on their notes and outlines.

- Review (peer or teacher) – for this project, we asked students to read each others' papers and provide feedback.

- Revising – after the peer review exercise, students revised their papers.

- Second draft – students handed in a second draft, along with their outline, first draft, and other notes.

We elected not to ask students to write journals on these final two stages, but rather to have them turn in one last journal in which they could reflect on the entire process from beginning to final paper.

Background on journals

Journal writing is often an important element of an effective writing class. Students are encouraged to use journals to record their thoughts as they search for ideas to use in their essay assignments. These thoughts can remain as private and personal as writers wish, "without fear of making mistakes or facing criticism for what they have to say" (Lindemann, 1987, p. 81). But ideally the journals do more than just "keep a record." According to Cole et al. (1998), "Journal writing provides a place for learners to develop an awareness of their own discovery processes. Thus, journals can provide opportunities to heighten self-awareness and engage writers in a process of critical thinking" (p. 557). Ideas recorded in journals are fed back into the minds of writers, making writers re-think—as in *think again* but also as in *think differently*—about their recorded ideas. These ideas may change and expand as new ideas and connections are added to the mix. As Leki (1998) says, "You will most likely discover that the very act of writing itself stimulates your thinking" (p. 17).

Some studies have shown that students value the effort of writing journals, especially when there is a possibility for teacher feedback through the journals. A recent study with students in one Spanish class showed that 88% of participants "reacted positively to the use of journals" at the end of the semester (Ewald, 2006, p. 46), and that "for many learners in this study, dialogue journals were described as the most instrumental course aspect and as an element without which learning could not have taken place" (p. 47). Casanave (2004) confirms this learning aspect when she says, "Students use them [journals] to build fluency of

language, fluency of thinking, and fluency and confidence in exploration of ideas and content" (p. 72).

In a writing course, however, the focus of most journal writing is on material to use in composing a piece of writing. Feedback from the teacher is usually in regard to topic or topic development. Zemach (2007) takes a different tack with her students' journals when she proposes asking them to use their journals to reflect on the writing *process* instead of (or in addition to) the writing *topic*:

> If your students keep writing journals, consider having them chart their thoughts at each [process writing] stage of their first essay; then have them go back and reread their comments before they start their second paper. In this way, you'll be nurturing thoughtful writers.… (Zemach, 2007, p. 13)

This use of journals to reflect on the writing process is what we wanted to explore further, to see how the journals could help students make sense of the process writing process.

The students

The participants in our study were university students in three different writing classes. The one-semester classes (15 weeks) met once a week for 90 minutes. At the beginning of the semester we gave the students a short survey to determine what previous experience they had had, if any, with the process writing approach. Out of a total of 76 students, only 22 knew about the PW approach. The class breakdown of these students is as follows:

- 43 first and second year students in a 'basic' class in the faculty of Education

- 17 second and third year students in an 'intermediate' class in the faculty of Education

- 16 students of varying years and faculties in an 'advanced' General Education course

Eight students dropped out for reasons unknown.

Journal system and appearance

The students were asked to write five journals each as they completed two paper assignments: one paper at the beginning of the semester and one at the end. Ideally a total of ten journals were collected from each student, although this ideal could not be maintained due to student absence, etc. The remaining writing assignments during the term did not include journal writing.

A set of five journals was categorized into: Brainstorming, Organizing, First Draft, Peer Editing, and Whole Process. The Whole Process journal was intended for students to write in retrospect whatever they had in mind while they were writing. Journals were on B5 paper with a title describing which journal it was, an empty box to indicate where to write, and more space at the bottom for teacher response to the journal (see Appendix). A total of 442 journals were collected for our research.

What was in the journals

Increased understanding

Our first question was if the journals would demonstrate increased understanding of the PW approach. Nearly all of the journals, especially those at the beginning of the term, displayed some excitement and wonder about the skills and strategies students were learning. Following are two examples showing how students expressed their interest in the PW approach.

Ex. 1 (Whole Process journal, beginning of term)

I think that my first draft is not clear very much. So my partner a little confused. But I made use of my partner's ideas, my final draft became better than before. I think it is important for improving to consider other person's idea.

This student, in her Whole Process journal at the end of the first paper assignment, remembers her experiences with a peer editor and describes the benefit of that experience. She generalizes to say that considering "other person's idea" is a good way to improve one's own thinking and writing. The journal perhaps did two things for her at this point: 1) it allowed her to record these details for her own memory; and 2) it allowed her to consciously select a step in the process that she felt was most helpful to her, making her not only remember but reevaluate each step of the process.

Ex. 2 (Brainstorming journals, beginning and end of term)

I have rarely think of a structure of sentences through brainstorming until [the teacher] gave us an opportunity of brainstorming. I was so hasty that I couldn't consider contents of a composition with my presence of mind up to the present. Now, however, I can find more efficient and logical way of writing than before. I want to try to make progress not only in writing but also in brainstorming itself with listing, clustering and so on.

I had difficulty in deciding what I would write. I couldn't do brainstorming well because I was interested in many things. I regarded narrowing a topic as important, but I haven't narrowed a topic yet. So I must make an effort.

For this student the first journal records a series of discoveries she made about the process writing approach. In the process of writing the journal, the student likely was able to solidify the ideas in her mind. By the time she writes the second journal for her final paper, she seems to understand what she should do, despite her inability to do what she knows is "important." She also challenges herself in writing to "make an effort."

Shift in purpose

Our second research question was whether the journals would serve the same purpose as the students became familiar with process writing. We encouraged them to write whatever came to their minds about each particular part of the process. However, what students actually wrote in their journal entries turned out to venture into territory far removed from the process writing approach. For example, a few students actually performed, or duplicated, brainstorms

on the journal pages. One student also used her journal to confess to plagiarism on the paper she had written.

At least one dominant pattern emerged of a shift in purpose from the beginning of the semester to the end. A substantial number of students used the journals, especially at the end of the semester, to write not about PW, but about the topic they had chosen for the essay. Some examples follow. Each example shows beginning- and end-of-term journals from the same student.

Ex. 3 (Whole Process journals, beginning and end of term)

I couldn't have brainstorm. I didn't write enough. I want to write very well in the next essay. I want to write the detail of essay more.

At first, I decided the movie "commentaries on the Gedo Wars," but the other day I watched "Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix." So I decided to write it.

In this case the early journal focuses on technical aspects of the student's paper such as length ("didn't write enough") and support ("detail"). These are connected with what the student has been taught about the process writing approach. However, the later journal at the end of the term begins immediately to discuss how he arrived at the topic for his final paper ("Harry Potter"). These journals, though both written after completion of the respective essays, address very different aspects of those essays. It's possible that, with the process writing approach more and more ingrained in the student's mind, he has less to write about the process itself, while the topic of each paper keeps changing and creating

new challenges for him to deal with, making topic more of a natural issue to deal with in the journals.

Ex. 4 (Peer Editing journals, beginning and end of term)

After peer editing, I found that my draft lacks something. It was only items. I will take my own idea. I want to make more interesting draft. My sentence in the conclusion isn't match a topic sentence. The topic was how to cook, but the conclusion was enjoying eating. I think my partner gave me good advice.

My partner knows OC. So we talked about it very much. I tought [*sic*] him about more. On the other hand, I didn't read the book which he recommended. I want to read it.

Ex. 5 (Brainstorming journals, beginning and end of term)

I like brainstorming because I can write down sentences easily after it. I like thinking freely. Brainstorming needs much time. When I have to write fast, it is useless. We need more blank space.

I work part time job at craftwork shop. And after I learn a lot of things, I thought that the list which stick on clothes at stores are incorrect. So I chose the topic. And also my acquaintance who run lunch box shop said "there are many medical seasoning in the lunch box at convenience stores...."

In these students' earlier journals, they focus on the part of the process that they had just finished (peer editing and brainstorming, respectively). The student in Example 5 mentions her topic by name, but only in the context of how her topic at the end of her essay was different than at the beginning of it, a point that may have come up during the peer editing session.

In the later journals they both choose to focus almost exclusively on the topics that they had chosen. Again, what exactly they had to do in the brainstorming and peer editing parts of the process may have been familiar to them by the end of the semester, so the journals became a vehicle for them to explore topics rather than to reflect on brainstorming or peer editing per se.

Ex. 6 (Brainstorming journals, beginning and end of term)

It was difficult for me to select the topic. However, once I started brainstorming, many ideas came into my mind. I could remember many things that I had forgotten. It was really fun. And, it was easy that I express the idea in Japanese but it was difficult to translate from Japanese words to English. Here were factor I was at a loss for words. I had a time when I faltered words, but had a time when I could write many ideas like chain.

I'm interested in nutrition so I chose a topic on this field. However, I have never studied about this so it was difficult for me to conceive many words. I thought that brainstorming makes our idea order, and I can come to deepen my idea about topic. I

felt that I can be easy to find some connections between some ideas. So I think brainstorming is useful before I start to write my essay.

This example represents an exception to our general conclusion about journal topics shifting toward the end of the semester. In the first brainstorming journal, the student comes to some interesting conclusions about brainstorming, both positive and negative. Later, when asked to write in her journal again about brainstorming, she starts out discussing her choice of topic, but then devotes the remainder of the journal entry to more thoughts she has about how useful brainstorming is for her. Such examples of students "staying on topic" in their journals by avoiding discussions of topic are not rare, but they are the minority.

Stage(s) helped by journals

While we feel that the journals overall were helpful to the students, there were a lot of them assigned during the term. In some cases students were at a loss for what to say, thinking they had already written their feelings about these issues earlier in the semester. So our third research question arose as a bid to see whether using the journals was more beneficial to students at one particular stage of the PW process than at another stage.

It is difficult to judge benefit, so our only resource for measurement was to take a qualitative look at the journals and see where students said the most—and wrote the most positively. Another criterion for measurement, if possible, would be if the actual writing of the journal helped the student turn a corner in understanding the part of the process in question.

As far as positive or excited comments were concerned, the Peer Editing journals had the most. The peer editing experience was very illuminating for most students, even those who had experienced it before. One example follows:

Ex. 7 (Peer Editing journal, beginning of term)

This activity is really fun! I thought this paragraph is good, but my partner said to me, "This paragraph is a little short I want to know about it more deeply." This advice is really useful and help me to improve my writing skill. In addition, reading my partner's paragraph is very interesting. I can read the sentences more carefully than usual.

Other comments include "I enjoy peer editing very much"; "Peer editing was so fun"; I feel fun to get the opinion from other people"; "and "I enjoy this activity very much!" In forcing the students to recall what they achieved during peer editing, these journals may have helped them to remember more, and perhaps to appreciate more.

However, taking the idea that journals are meant to provide *feedback* for students as well as to keep *records*, it could also be argued that the brainstorm journals were at least as useful to the students as the peer editing journals. This is because the brainstorming journals showed more sorting out of challenging ideas than the other journals did. Brainstorming was also new to many of the students, and it was more of a creative exercise than other steps such as peer editing. The following examples show students struggling in different ways with understanding how brainstorming works.

Ex. 8 (Brainstorming journal, end of term)

I didn't know what to do. I made it through somehow. It was not difficult but I was troubled. I'm not familiar with this kind of idea development approach.

Ex. 9 (Brainstorming journal, beginning of term)

I chose listing for brainstorming. That's because I thought the way is much easier. On the process of listing, I brought the scene to my mind at first. The scene reminded me of various words. I just intently listed them. The way was something association game.

The student in Example 8 seems to reach an impasse that perhaps even the journal exercise hasn't helped him work out. But the student in Example 9 concludes his journal with a keen observation about the relation between brainstorming and a game he's played before; it's possible that the act of writing in the journal may have solidified that analogy for him.

Conclusions

Concerning research question 1, the students often wrote, at least, that they wanted to improve their English. Some announced in journals that they understood a certain step better than before. It was demonstrated that students could articulate their feelings; they could "revisit" what was going through their minds; and they could make more sense out of PW. This means journals can be a practical tool to increase awareness of the process writing process in the writing classroom.

JALT2007 — Challenging Assumptions

As for research question 2, the journals did not really serve a fixed purpose over time as we saw many students shift in focus from PW at the beginning to topic at the end. We believe this is a welcome sign. Journals can serve different purposes at different times because ultimately they are for students to talk to themselves (or occasionally to their teachers).

For research question 3, inasmuch as journals pushed students to think about each step, all journals served a purpose, but students seemed to say the most (and think the most) in the brainstorming and peer editing stages. We think that for them these stages are more intriguing than the other stages.

In conclusion, journals can surely play a role in helping students reflect on their thought processes as they engage in process writing, whereby students' autonomy is facilitated in the long run.

Changes for future

After having gone through the process of asking students to write journals on their impressions of the PW steps once, we found that there is room for improvement if this study is carried out again. At the beginning of the semester, we briefly explained our study and asked for their cooperation, but it seems that we did not go into enough detail. Because of this, a few students misunderstood what they were supposed to do. If we were clearer as to what we wanted the students to write, we may have been able to avoid this mistake. In addition, on the journal sheet itself, we would make a smaller space for students to write their impressions.

Some students were a little overwhelmed at the thought of having to fill in the space that was provided, although we did not specify that they had to. Another issue to consider is that the students were most likely aware of the teacher as they were writing their journals. Would they write what they think the teacher would like to hear rather than their own true feelings? Perhaps one way to remedy this problem would be to ask students to write in their L1 to express themselves more freely and honestly.

We would also be more consistent on the writing time. In this study, we did not coordinate well with each other nor from journal to journal so some journals were written outside of the class time for homework and some were done in class as a timed exercise. We found that we got varying degrees of quantity as well as quality of the entries because of this. We would also like to have gotten feedback from the students about the journal writing process itself, either by interviewing them or having them write a reflective journal at the end of the term.

One final facet of this exercise that we did not look into was whether these journals resulted in better writing from the students. Future research could look at whether students who write journals utilize the skills they've learned better than students who don't write journals.

In spite of these limitations in our study, we feel that we learned a great deal about how well journals help students reflect on their progress as learners, at least in the context of process writing.

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Appendix

Sample journal sheet

Journal on Writing Process: Brainstorming

Name: _____

Student #: _____

Date: _____

Please write your impressions about the process of brainstorming.

Teacher's comments

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