

Teachers as Learners: Evolving Perspectives

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Ongoing language learning experience helps foreign language teachers empathize with their own students. This paper presents the Reading-Writing Component of an in-service teacher development program. The component invited participants to adopt a learner perspective, writing original articles on secondary school textbook reading topics. The paper shares one example of a participant's writing outcomes and narrative data, pointing to the participant's autonomous self-expression and enhanced confidence when readopting a teacher stance. Directions for further research are also suggested.

継続して言語を習得するという体験は、外国語の教員にとって自分の生徒に感情移入するのに大変役立つものである。この研究論文は、現職の教員研修プログラムで行っているリーディングとライティングのワークショップについて述べている。研修の一つのセッションで、研修者たちは高校の教科書のリーディング教材をもとに独自の記事を書き、教師としてではなく学習者として自分自身を見つめるよう求められる。論文の中で、セッション中にある研修者が書いた記事や振り返りのコメントなどの例を共有することで、その研修者の学習者としての自主的な自己表現や、再び教員の立場に戻ったときに自信が増していることを示していく。今後のさらに詳しい研究の方向性も提案する。

SECOND AND foreign language teachers can benefit greatly by ongoing language learning; the experience helps them empathize with their own students and therefore make more effective teaching decisions (Snow, 2007). Although it is recommended that teacher development (TD) programs emphasize language proficiency (Barnes, 2002; Pasternak & Bailey, 2004), few of the in-service TD options open to Japan's high school English teachers do so.

This paper presents the experiential Reading-Writing Component of a yearlong in-service TD program. In writing original articles on high school textbook reading topics, participants adopted an "EFL learner" perspective as they worked to establish unique contexts that clarified their readerships, their roles as writers, and their writing purposes. After each workshop, they reflected on their own experiences and evolving perceptions of English as a tool for action in the real world (Gee, 2001). The writing outcomes and narrative data from one participant are shared here, illustrating the Reading-Writing Component's impact on her autonomous self-expression and confidence as she subsequently readopted a teacher stance. Some directions for future research are also suggested.



Perspectives From the Field

Language as Situated

Gee (2001) argued that objectively comprehending and conveying neutral information are not the main functions of language. Drawing on Tomasello's (1999) position that "linguistic symbols are social conventions for inducing others to construe, or take a perspective on, some experiential situation" (p. 118), Gee asserted that language "is about communicating perspectives on experience and action in the world, often in contrast to alternative and competing perspectives" (p. 716). Language supports people in their efforts to establish and maintain affiliations in cultures, social groups, and institutions; Warschauer (2003) defined our ability to benefit from these affiliations as "social capital" (p. 316).

In a study of pre-service nonnative EFL teachers, Bektas-Cetinkaya (2012) reiterated the notion of reading, specifically, as "sociocultural practice, to be approached from social, cultural, and political perspectives" (p. 18). Redefining reading as social practice helps teachers shift from the traditional focus on readers' interaction with a text to readers' interaction with the writer of the text. In authentic situations, effective reader-writer interaction allows readers to redefine not only themselves, but also their positions within material and social worlds.

L2 Reading and Writing

The view of language as situated in social practice is, unfortunately, at odds with the reality of many English classes in Japan's secondary schools. Although teachers may agree with the principles of communicative language teaching as set forth in the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's Course of Study for Foreign Languages (MEXT, 2009), they face a variety of challenges in putting them into practice. Perennial obstacles include washback from university entrance

exams (Gorsuch, 2000; Murphey, 2004; Sakui, 2004; Tahira, 2012) and textbooks that perpetuate a perception of English as a decontextualized body of knowledge to be internalized (Hanks, 1991; Suzuki & Collins, 2007).

This perception underpins the *yakudoku*, or "read and translate," approach that continues to dominate four skills and reading classes. Students are tested on their memory and comprehension of readings, as well as their ability to manipulate the target grammar structures featured. However, they are seldom requested to read critically, react to what they have read, or ascertain a writer's intent, voice, or tone. As Snow (2007) pointed out, when intensive readings are used primarily to teach vocabulary and grammar in this way, students not only misunderstand the purpose of reading, but are also unlikely to derive any enjoyment from the experience. Similarly, students in secondary school writing classes almost always find themselves writing for an audience of one, their English teacher, who reads for the sole purpose of evaluating linguistic accuracy. This lack of context makes for low student motivation in writing tasks; after all, why continue trying to articulate experiences and thoughts if they are to have no discernible impact on a reader?

Reading-Writing Workshops I – 3

Context and Rationale

I was involved in designing and facilitating the Reading-Writing Component of a yearlong in-service TD program for senior high English teachers from around Japan (Collins & Suzuki, 2010). From March to July, roughly corresponding to the teachers' spring semester, the 10 participating teachers traveled to Tokyo once a month for 1 or 2 full days of sessions designed to provide them with experiential learning opportunities. These included participation in a formal debate tournament and performances of dramatic scenes, in addition to workshops on practical topics

such as team teaching, explanation of grammatical structures, and cross-content collaboration.

After each month's sessions, participants were requested to complete a Reflection Survey 1 (see Appendix A for sample questions on a Reading-Writing Workshop). Additionally, a "Teacher Forum," similar to a blog, gave them a chance to reflect more publicly on the contents of the sessions. Following a week-long Summer Intensive Seminar, the fall semester brought open class demonstrations and final presentations on participant portfolios.

A key objective of the Reading-Writing Component was for participating teachers to experience situated reading and writing in English for themselves. A preliminary survey revealed that, although some had constructed extra readings for their own students, none had experienced writing in English for an audience of their own. The three workshops would allow participants to explore, from a learner perspective, the impact of reader-writer and writer-reader interaction on understanding.

Snow (2001) advised teachers that they must understand "how much they can and should demand of students, how much encouragement students need, what kinds of encouragement students need, [and] what kind of goals will effectively motivate them" (p. 7) and make decisions accordingly. It was hoped that, upon completing and reflecting on the Reading-Writing Component, TD participants would readopt their teacher stances with greater confidence, drawing on stronger empathy with their own students when setting and facilitating reading and writing tasks.

As Medgyes (2001) reminded us, "most [nonnative English speaking teachers] are all too aware that they are teachers and learners of the same subject" (p. 38). With a few exceptions, most of the TD participants had seldom had opportunities to interact with either authentic texts or with native English speakers. An additional objective of the component, then, was to sup-

port TD participants to develop their own English proficiency, a key part of professional development for EFL teachers (Barnes, 2002; Lavender, 2002; Pasternak & Bailey, 2004). The component would invite the TD participants to "join a 'literacy club' that makes a wealth of English-language information, ranging from implicit cultural information to explicit information, available to them" (Bektas-Cetinkaya, 2012, p. 18).

Organization and Contents

Reading-Writing Workshop I

TD Program participants attended sessions each month from March through July. Reading-Writing Workshop 1 was part of a special 2-day block of sessions in March. Participants were introduced to the concept of situated language and discussed some of the educational assumptions underpinning English education in Japan's secondary schools. They also compared three short articles I had written: (a) a personal reflection on my own language learning experience for an in-house newsletter, (b) a column about tech-related neologisms for a junior high school textbook newsletter, and (c) an essay on team teaching's potential to support MEXT goals for an academic newsletter. The participants discussed how the different purposes and audiences for each article had helped me make specific choices about tone while maintaining my own writer voice.

Participants were then asked to imagine themselves as columnists and to choose a lesson from an English I, English II, or Reading textbook they were using at the time. Their task was to write an article about or related to the lesson content. The first step was to clarify the context of the article; participants imagined what type of English language periodical they were writing for and its readership. They then established the purpose for the article—to inform, persuade, move, inspire, and so on—and began to think about developing both a voice and an appropriate tone. The

participants continually revisited their purpose as they searched for and skimmed related English articles online, reported their progress to TD Program instructors, consulted with other participants, and began revising their first drafts. The participants were given 4 hours in all and were given 2-week deadlines for submitting their second and final drafts to the TD Program webpage.

Participants were warned from the beginning that the time constraints of Workshop 1 would prevent them from engaging in the kind of brainstorming and outlining integral to process writing (White & Arndt, 1991). Even with a genre-based approach (Badger & White, 2000) that left out the “modeling stage,” the instructors had some misgivings about the participants’ ability to develop and write articles quickly enough. However, almost all the participants’ first drafts were surprisingly well organized and fluent. A much bigger challenge for them was to understand and operate within the context provided; it emerged during progress reports that some participants still thought they were writing supplementary readings for their own students and therefore were struggling to write about challenging topics in the simplest possible language. Other traps participants fell into included presenting two sides of an argument equally when trying to write persuasively and presenting the kind of pat, formulaic conclusions often encountered in the textbooks they teach with.

Reading-Writing Workshop 2

The second workshop was unique among the three in two important ways. First, it was integrated with the TD Program’s Drama Component. In March, participants had been cast in roles from three Hollywood movies, and each of the four scene groups had been assigned a single scene in one of the movies to explore. Second, Reading-Writing Workshop 2 was scheduled in June, when the TD Program overlapped with a separate seminar on team teaching, and 20 native-English-speaking assistant

language teachers (ALTs) joined the sessions. As a pre-workshop assignment, TD participants had been given the entire screenplay of their movie to read and had been asked to prepare questions about cultural aspects of the movie, including the background and setting, customs and behaviors, the characters’ motivations, and the language used.

For the first session, scene partners were separated and paired with ALTs for a discussion of the screenplay. In the next session, still working with their ALT partners, they took on the role of co-authors whose task it was to research and write about a particularly difficult cultural point related to the scene. They were free to determine the genre of their writing, but their audience was set: their own Japanese scene partners, who needed deeper understanding in order to more effectively memorize and perform their scene at the Summer Intensive Seminar in July. In the third session, they shared their drafts with their scene partners, giving and receiving feedback on the drafts’ helpfulness. Participants were again given deadlines for submitting second and final drafts online and asked in the reflection survey about their experiences collaborating with ALTs.

Some co-author teams were creative, filling in gaps in subtext and cross-cultural understanding by writing diary entries, letters, newspaper articles, and dialogs that extended the scene. For others, however, understanding and operating within the context was again the most challenging aspect of the task. Though they had the benefit of ALT partners, as well as their Reading-Writing Workshop 1 experience, a few found it difficult to set aside their teacher stance and added comprehension questions for imaginary student readers.

Reading-Writing Workshop 3

For the final workshop, the participants found themselves on relatively familiar ground, again choosing a lesson from one

of their own four-skills or reading textbooks. They were now asked to adopt the role of textbook writer—not an English textbook targeting EFL learners, but a content-based textbook for tertiary students in an English-speaking environment. If an original textbook lesson featured anecdotes about sportsmanship, for example, a participant might imagine contributing an essay to a textbook written for P.E. majors in Singapore who hoped to become basketball coaches someday. Each participant was free to clarify a context that would allow them to set a goal for interacting with their readers and develop a voice and tone appropriate to the genre.

Again, participants were invited to go online to supplement their background knowledge and broaden their perspective on their chosen topic. They also shared their progress with the TD instructors and other participants after writing and after revising their first draft. Before submitting their final draft online, the participants were asked to consult with teachers from other departments at their own schools. A participant working with an environmental topic, such as biofuels or deforestation, might explain the contents of the original textbook lesson to a science teacher in Japanese and ask for advice on directions the article might take. Reading-Writing Workshop 3 extended into the Summer Intensive Seminar, with participants sharing their latest drafts in groups of three. After taking notes, they discussed their responses to each article, then offered suggestions for strengthening other writers' purposes and interaction with target readers.

By now, most of the participants were relatively comfortable with the notion of temporarily adopting what Gee (2004) called a "virtual identity." Although the audiences for their writing were imaginary, the goal was for each participant, as Gee says, to "know that he or she has the *capacity*, at some level, to take on the virtual identity as a real-world identity It is often enough that they have sensed new powers in themselves" (p. 114).

The follow-up discussion was lively, with participants brainstorming ways to meet the challenges they faced in setting reading and writing contexts for their own students in the fall. As evidenced by their outcomes and comments on the reflection survey, the most challenging step in this task sequence turned out to be taking notes on other participants' writing. Some were unable to identify the main points and organization in the essays, while others fell into the perennial teacher trap of proof-reading for accuracy.

Evolving Perspectives

Case Study Y

Each participant brought unique English learning and teaching experiences to the Reading-Writing Workshops. These experiences impacted their attitudes toward each task, including their confidence, motivation, and ability to make autonomous choices in planning and writing their articles. Participant Y's journey is of particular interest, since, among the participants in the TD Program, she was under the most pressure at her school to prepare students for one thing only: Japan's National Center Test for University Admissions. Participant Y had no personal experience in either writing for an audience in English or asking her students to do so.

For Reading-Writing Workshop 1, she chose a challenging textbook lesson on water shortages in South Africa. Heavy on technical vocabulary, yet light on message, the lesson reading lacked a sense of writer voice or tone. Participant Y's first draft was similarly impersonal and featured a tacked-on conclusion recommending that water was an issue more people should be aware of. Through discussion with instructors and other participants, she was able to adopt a stronger columnist stance, eventually producing an article that was more personal and therefore more persuasive. Participant Y also studied web-based

periodicals and worked to create a realistic and attractive layout for her article, including photos and sidebars. In the reflection survey, she noted that the biggest challenge had been to clarify and share her own perspective on the topic.

Cast in the movie *Se7en*, Participant Y identified “revising the first draft” as the most challenging phase of Reading-Writing Workshop 2. Her ALT partner, on the other hand cited “identifying a cultural aspect to focus on” and “creating a first draft” as most challenging and allowed Participant Y to take the lead during these steps. Although they were dismayed to realize that their first draft amounted to little more than a synopsis of the movie, the pair was able to transform it into a more insightful piece of writing that included helpful statistical charts and was written in second person to Participant Y’s scene partner.

The lesson Participant Y chose to work with for Reading-Writing Workshop 3 featured another challenging scientific topic: the effects of sleep deprivation on humans. With her previous writing experiences in mind, she immediately established a context that would help her personalize her writing. Imagining herself as a textbook writer for nursing students in Australia, she chose to write an essay on how to identify and advise students who showed signs of sleep deprivation. The process of contextualizing the content supported her in creating a first draft that was far stronger than those she had produced in the first two workshops. After cross-content consultation with both a science teacher and the nurse at her school, she presented a second draft for the group discussion phase that included discussion, rather than comprehension, questions and a model form a nurse might complete based on a student interview.

Participant Y’s responses to the reflection survey showed how much her confidence had increased since Reading-Writing Workshop 1; she noted satisfaction with, among other things, her ability to interact with other participants’ writing and other participants’ ability to interact with hers. To an open-ended

question about her evolving perspectives she answered, “Almost all textbooks provide us with only facts about some matters or histories. That’s why I’ve never had an idea that we try to feel connection with writers. Feeling a connection develops our positive attitude for learning.” In reflecting on the impact of the workshops on her future teaching, she wrote, “I’ll try to plan lessons to encourage students to feel connections with writers, especially in reading class.”

Readopting a Teacher Stance

Given the lack of support for teacher autonomy at Participant Y’s school, she is likely to meet some resistance when introducing message-based reading and writing activities in her classroom. However, now that she and the other TD Program participants have experienced the challenges and satisfaction of interaction from both reader and writer stances, they may find ways to enrich their own students’ language learning experiences.

The final Teacher Forum topic centered around the Reading-Writing Workshops, inviting participants to reflect on their own experiences and to imagine ways to apply them to their own teaching (see Appendix B). Seven participants reported increased confidence in one or all of the following areas: reading for gist, identifying main ideas, and developing a writer voice and tone appropriate to a context and readership. Five reported feeling greater empathy for their own students’ efforts to tackle reading and writing tasks. Four were optimistic about planning and facilitating simpler versions of the workshops in their own classes, although two of them were unsure about how much they could reasonably expect from their students. Finally, four of the 10 participants were still struggling with the notions of writer-reader and reader-writer interaction.

Directions for Further Research

Gee (2004) described learning as, ideally, “both a personal and a unique trajectory through a complex space of opportunities . . . and a social journey as one shares aspects of that trajectory with others . . . for a shorter or longer time before moving on” (p. 89). The Reading-Writing Workshop component was conceived as a way for participants to go on three different reading and writing “journeys.” Although End-of-Year Reflection Survey results are still pending, the component is being fine-tuned for inclusion in future programs.

Two areas for further research suggest themselves immediately, the first concerning corpus analysis of the participants’ writing outcomes. Of particular interest is how much and how effectively they drew on the contents and language in the original textbook lessons and in other reading materials they found online. The second area regards the sustainability of the participants’ newfound enthusiasm for reading and writing as situated action. This may be observable in (a) how much they share their TD Program experiences with teachers at their own schools; (b) the extent to which they invite students to interact with the writers featured in the textbooks, rather than just the contents; and (c) whether they choose to extend textbook lessons with contextualized writing activities. Armed with their own learning experiences and evolving perspectives, Japan’s junior and senior high school English teachers may be better equipped to tap into any inherent desire their own students have to use English to interact with others.

Bio Data

Peter J. Collins is an Associate Professor in the Communication Department at Tokai University’s Research Institute of Educational Development. His research interests include teacher development, team teaching, and situated language.

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Appendix A

Questions Related to Reading-Writing Workshop I (From Reflection Survey I of 5)

- 22) What textbook and lesson did you target? Why?
- 23) Which were the most challenging phases of the workshop? (Check two.)
- Clarifying a context for my reading and writing
 - Choosing a textbook lesson topic
 - Reading the textbook lesson
 - Finding readings to supplement the lesson topic
 - Identifying key information in the supplementary readings
 - Synthesizing the key information with my own knowledge and perspectives
 - Organizing the key information and my own perspectives into an article
 - Revising my article
- 24) Explain why you checked the items you did for Question 23.
- 25) I was able to manage my time well during the workshop. (Check one.)
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly agree
- 26) I'm satisfied with my writing outcome. (Check one.)
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly agree

27) I'm optimistic that my outcomes will be stronger in Workshops 2 and 3.

28) Further comments / questions

Appendix B

Teacher Forum: Topic 5

This month, you took part in the third and final Reading-Writing Workshop. In researching and writing original articles, you tried to imagine and establish three different contexts. This month, please share your own experiences in the workshop, and imagine how you might provide your students with similar experiences.

1. For your students, what are the goals of reading in English? Of writing in English?
2. When and how can you help students experience feeling a connection with a writer?
3. When and how can you help students experience making a connection with a reader?