Teacher–Student Interactive L2 Writing Assignments

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This study describes the efficacy of continuous teacher–student interactions through L2 writing practice based on student interests. Essay writing and fluency writing are popular activities in university EFL writing classes, but writing activities that allow students opportunities to continue ongoing discussions with teachers can have unique benefits: eliciting reason-based writing responses in English to questions in teacher's feedback, broadening students' perspectives, and providing motivation. This study was conducted during a university EFL writing course over 15 weeks. To illustrate how such responses can be encouraged and how student perspectives can develop, examples of interactions between a teacher and student who had significantly more frequent continuous written interactions than the class average are used to illustrate the benefits of ongoing discussions with the teacher through L2 writing practice.

本論では、第2言語での自由作文課題における教師と学生間の継続したインタラクションの効果について報告する。大学の英語ライティング授業においては、エッセイライティングや流暢さの向上を目指した活動などが取り入れられているが、教師との継続した対話が可能であるライティング活動でのフィードバックには、学生自身の考えや価値観の根拠を引き出し、学生の視野を広げ、さらには、モチベーションを高めるなどの利点が期待される。本研究は、英語初中級から中級者を対象とした大学のライティング授業において15週にわたり行われた作文課題を対象に、教師からのフィードバックに積極的に返信を行い、継続したインタラクションをクラス平均よりも多く行なった学生1名に焦点を当て、第2言語ライティングにおいて教師と対話を続けることの様々な利点を明らかにするものである。

Teacher feedback, the importance of which has been acknowledged in the field of L2, is not only crucial for encouraging learners to improve their skills and enhance their learning, but is also an important interaction that provides learners with scaffolding. Scaffolding is vital support given to learners based upon their current learning capabilities and goals, and can facilitate leaners moving beyond their current abilities (Vygotsky, 1978). Previous studies on interactive L2 writing activities have demonstrated the various benefits of teacher feedback for students. One interactive L2 writing activity between a teacher and student is dialogue journal writing (DJW). Takahashi (2016) had Japanese medical students use DJW through Google Docs over a period of 10 months. She focused on one student who actively engaged in the activity, and revealed the process of the student's learning. Although the aim of the writing activity was to provide medical students the opportunity to write in a second language (L2), the student learned different aspects of medical professionalism and fostered his own professionalism in the medical field due to the interactions with his English teacher. Takahashi discussed how the features of DJW, such as teacher feedback, long-period writing activities, and the use of narrative style promoted the student's learning.

In the contexts of Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) education, Chang (2015) followed participants who undertook continuous written interactions on a Bulletin Board System (BBS) with mentors over seven weeks. She also focused on one student to describe the detailed process of change in the student's perspective on a topic through continuous written interaction. Chang demonstrated that the student's mentor's feedback questions helped the student extract important information to improve clarity. Chang suggested that the changes in the student's perspective began because the mentor's questions elicited reason-based responses from the student. Additionally, because the mentor provided her reasons when stating her own opinions, the student gained new perspectives through the interaction. In other words, ongoing discussions on the same or expanded topics using questions in addition to knowing teachers' opinions and rationales played an essential role in encouraging the student to deepen their learning.

In terms of the significance of questioning, Zhao, Pandian, and Singh (2016) discussed the effectiveness of teacher feedback that includes questions for the purpose of encouraging language learners to think critically. They concluded that the level of thinking and responses produced by learners generally should correspond to the level of teachers' questioning (Orlich et al., 2013; Zhao et al., 2016). To consider higher-level, probing questions, students need adequate time for cognitive processing as well as for formulating reasoned L2 responses. Therefore, writing assignments that allow students to think about and research information together with frequent, comprehensive high-level teacher feedback are optimal for deepening students' learning and improving the quality of L2 writing.

ARTICLES

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The present study investigated the efficacy of teacher–student interactive L2 writing assignments by focusing on Student A—whose interactions were significantly more frequent than the class average—to assess the benefits of continuing ongoing discussions with the teacher.

Examples of Teacher–Student Interactive Writing

The examples shown here are from the submissions and responses between a Japanese teacher of English at a university in Japan and Student A, who was a female second-year student with a TOEIC score of 396 at the beginning of the semester. Fourteen Japanese Human Science majors, ranging from second-year to fourth-year students, participated in this class. The participant was selected because she responded to 76.9% of the teacher's feedback, which was far greater than the 10.6% class average response rate, and therefore provided the best chance to evaluate features of continuous written interaction between a teacher and a student in the class. Students were allowed to use dictionaries, online sources, or any other reference materials and they also wrote responses outside of the class. The class met once a week for 90 minutes for 15 weeks. As shown in the appendix, which presents all the topics Student A submitted, her 53 compositions represent 17 distinctive thematic threads and 13 threads among them consisted of more than one composition.

Encouraging Reason-Based Responses

The following examples of teacher–student interaction show the kinds of questions asked by the teacher and how Student A responded. The following sequence is an example of Student A's response to probing questions:

Composition 5: Fair Trade

> Each of us should do a little things for [people in developing countries], for example learning them, buy fair trade food or goods, and so on. People in developed countries should think why goods and food from foreign countries are cheaper. . . . [Opinion]

Teacher Response to Composition 5

> The basic question of me is if we need so many kinds of goods from outside Japan or a country. [Question 1] . . . Who gets the most profit out of buying goods of other cultures cheaply? [Question 2]

Student A's answer in Composition 6 demonstrates her use of English to address the teacher's questions using logical reasoning:

Composition 6: Fair Trade

> We need goods from outside a country. [Response to Question 1] Goods from outside are novel and help our make new goods, for example mixing outside and original goods. And producing (*sic*) goods more cheaply is treated very important. . . . [Reasoning response to Question 1] However, we must think the profit from other country. People making materials and goods get little profit. Directors get a lot of profit. [Response to Question 2] This is very unfair . . . . [Opinion]

Teacher Response to Composition 6

> What do you think will happen if the people living in developing countries get much money all of a sudden . . . [Question 3]

Composition 7: Fair Trade

> . . . people will be confused . . . They can buy so many things. This will make the countries changed. However I don't know whether this makes them happy. We should know the countries well, and we should do fair trade properly. [Reasoning response to Question 3]

As described earlier, probing questions are particularly effective for encouraging critical thinking (Zhao et al., 2016). The teacher gave Student A three probing question prompts, including a hypothetical question (Question 3), all of which guided her to analyze the issue of fair trade from multiple points of view. For Student A, these probing questions not only elicited immediate responses, but also reason-based responses. This demonstrates that the questions posed by the teacher within the activity provided scaffolding for reason-based responses.

Broadening Perspectives

Student A continued to refer to past conversation throughout her writing. In Composition 41, she wrote about the experience of walking in Tokyo from midnight to dawn for hours with her friend and viewing scenes she could not see from a train or car. In the feedback to Composition 41, the teacher helped her to raise her awareness by paraphrasing her experience and stating his own opinion: "I think it is good to see unusual scenes at unusual time . . . You can see totally different things if you change your perspectives . . ." In Composition 42, Student

A indicated that, as a result of this experience, she realized that she had seen only certain aspects of familiar things or places. Because Student A also wrote in a previous composition that she was taking a web design class during the semester, the teacher tried to connect the idea of "changing perspectives" with Student A's interests, such as designing and growing food, in the feedback to Composition 42:

Teacher Response to Composition 42

I think designing or making something, even crops or vegetables, requires a sense and creativity. [Opinion 1] . . . Professional creative designers, in my understanding, can create something new and different every day. [Opinion 2] Looking at something usual, they can think in a different way. [Paraphrase of Opinion 2]

Composition 43: Views

. . . Can we improve abilities to think or look in many views? If we think something in a different way, we look at things in more variety views than before.

The teacher stressed the importance of thinking in a different way, referring to abilities of creative designers as an example. As a result, Student A changed the title of Composition 43 to *Views*, which seemed to indicate that she realized the importance of changing her viewpoints and viewing things from diverse perspectives.

By the end of the semester, Student A had begun to integrate several of the ideas which she and the teacher had discussed throughout the term into her writing. For example, in Composition 35, Student A wrote that there were stereotypical opinions toward people living in different regional areas in Japan. The teacher suggested *acceptance* as the key word, stating that a judgment of good or bad was not a correct attitude to have toward something new or different, because the concept of "good and bad" was different in other countries. Later, Composition 49 demonstrated that she realized that she had also had a biased understanding of a farmer's lifestyle, and accepted that there were diverse values, thereby showing respect for farmers:

Composition 49: Farm

Before having gone there, I had thought farmers do things of farm every time and live so simply. . . . However it was wrong. . . . They enjoy their life and do many kinds of things; doing farm, having pets, and cooking. I feel there are many kinds of people and of live. Also each people enjoy their live.

Through her experience of village life, talking with farmers, and ongoing discussions with the teacher about her experience, she reflected on her own beliefs and values, and became more receptive to other viewpoints. Thus, the changes in her perspectives on different lifestyle happened. By the end, she often wrote about revisiting her past ways of thinking, without the instigation of the teacher.

Language Development

Interactive teacher–student writing activities also create opportunities for language scaffolding. For example, in the feedback to Composition 5, the teacher asked: "Who gets the most profit out of buying goods of other cultures cheaply?" Student A answered by incorporating the word "profit" from the teacher's feedback: "People making materials and goods get little profit. Directors get a lot of profit." She also actively integrated phrases from the teacher's responses. In the feedback to Composition 42, the teacher stated his own opinion about creative designers: "Looking at something usual, they can think in a different way" and in Composition 43, Student A responded: If we *think something in a different way* [emphasis added], we look at things in more variety views than before."

In addition, as shown in the response to Composition 35, the teacher pointed out *acceptance*, and Student A's response referred to the importance of acceptance by paraphrasing the teacher's comment: "I agree with you. *Acceptance* [emphasis added] is the most important to understand other cultures and people." Through this paraphrase, she indicated her understanding of the language used by the teacher, and incorporated vocabulary from the teacher's feedback into her own writing, thereby demonstrating second language development. To promote the acquisition of both language and content, multiple exposures to input and revisiting input are crucial (Stoller, 2002). Thus, ongoing discussions on the same or expanded topics have the potential to provide students with the opportunity to use same words and phrases repeatedly and facilitate students' language learning.

Effects on Motivation

One year after the class ended, the researcher conducted a follow-up, semi-structured interview in Japanese (L1) with Student A online to assess her experience in the course by focusing on learning outcomes resulting from the interactive writing activity. In the follow-up interview, Student A explained why she wrote so many more compositions (53) than the minimum requirement of 20. Her first

motivation was to improve her English skills. However, as the semester advanced, she said that she enjoyed responding to the teacher's feedback and enjoyed expressing her thoughts in English:

> When starting the 100-word writing assignment, I decided to try writing as many compositions as possible to improve my English skills. I wanted to practice as much as possible because it was a good opportunity. That was my first motivation . . . As the semester went on, I realized I had become able to communicate in English. I enjoyed responding to the teacher's feedback and writing my thoughts in English! [Translated by the author]

In focusing on meaning and content, the interactions with the teacher start to have made the student aware of the idea of using English as a tool for communication and not simply a subject to be learned. Students who believe writing as a way to express feelings and ideas as well as to expand learning are likely to be more engaged in writing tasks (MacArthur, Philippakos, & Graham, 2016). Additionally, to respond to the teacher's feedback, Student A researched the topics, thereby expanding her perspective and deepening her understanding:

> Sometimes, I didn't understand the feedback well or couldn't answer the questions from the teacher, so I looked them up online. It took me time to go through the feedback and think carefully to delve more into the topics. . . . Each time, the teacher responded to my entries very quickly with many lines of comments and questions! The teacher also wrote his opinions in the feedback, and some of them were totally different from what I had and so were very interesting to me [Underlined by the author]. That brought me to broader perspectives and motivated me to write more. . . . [Translated and underlined by the author]

Student A highly evaluated the teacher's feedback in terms of broadening her perspectives and as a means of motivating her to write more. As shown earlier, knowing teachers' opinions and rationales, students can gain new perspectives and develop their perspectives (Chang, 2015). Furthermore, teachers' active engagement in interactions where students try to express their own thoughts or sense of value in the L2 can motivate students to communicate using the L2 and encourage them to deepen their understanding of their experience (Chang, 2015).

Moreover, the interview revealed that the positive gains in motivation were sustained even after completion of the course. This positive gain in Student A's motivation can be seen as the result of developing self-efficacy. Self-efficacy determines how people think, motivate themselves, and behave, influencing actions that affect them later in life (Bandura, 1994). This appears to have happened through continuously engaging in interactive L2 writing:

> I felt a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction with my engagement in the course when the semester was done . . . I still try to write English and I sometimes write my thoughts or feelings in English in my diary. [Translated by the author]

Conclusion

Continuous teacher–student interactions through content-focused feedback not only provided the student with the opportunity to improve her English vocabulary usage and gain L2 writing motivation, but also helped her write reason-based responses in the L2 and expand her perspectives. Ongoing discussions with the teacher on the same or expanded topics, rather than disparate topics, seemed to play a major role in this student's development. Furthermore, topic choice played a significant role; that is, by selecting topics that were meaningful to her, Student A was able to reflect on her experience and beliefs and enhance her already established perspectives.

In addition, this research suggests that the role of EFL writing teachers is fourfold. The first role is to provide students with not only form-focused feedback but also constructive meaning-focused feedback by including probing questions to encourage students to reflect on and express their thoughts with reasons. Second, teachers should sometimes state their own opinions and rationales about the students' topics to help them to broaden their perspectives. Third, teachers should actively engage in interactions to motivate students to communicate using the L2. Fourth, teachers should present students with models of English to assist them in developing ways to express their thoughts in the L2. Considering the limited number of samples in this study, further inquiry is required. However, it is hoped that the present findings will provide further insights into effective writing instruction in EFL contexts.

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Eri Terada is currently a PhD student at Waseda University and teaches Japanese at Ohio State University. She also has taught Japanese in South Korea, Germany, and Japan. Her current research interests include critical thinking, collaborative learning, and reflective practice.

Appendix

1	Introduction myself	22	Matsudai *(Name of a farming village)*	41	Going around Tokyo
2	Responding #1	23	Matsudai	42	Going around Tokyo
3	Yesterday's mail	24	Today	43	Views
4	My thinking	25	Food industry	44	Views
5	Fair trade	26	Food industry	45	Views
6	Fair trade	27	Food industry	46	A book *(responses to 45 included)*
7	Fair trade	28	Industry	47	A book
8	Fair trade	29	Disney	48	A game
9	Culture	30	iPhones and smartphones	49	Farm
10	Culture	31	Twitter and Line	50	Farm
11	Culture	32	Coffee shops	51	Miyadaiku
12	Education	33	The difference of places	52	Miyadaiku
13	Animals	34	The difference of places	53	Albite (sic) *(Part-time job)*
14	Animals	35	The difference of places		
15	Animals	36	Tyouzyuugiga *(Scrolls of Frolicking Animals) (responses to 45 included)*		
16	Animals	37	Cultures		
17	Money	38	Cultures		
18	My brother	39	Cultures		
19	Advertisement	40	Stuff's (sic) attitude *(Staff's attitude)*		
20	Comedy				
21	Response *(responses to 17-18)*				

Note. The grayed out numbers show a beginning of interactions on a new topic.

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