Research and Writing at a tertiary level: reflective teaching.

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Abstract

This paper will focus on reflective teaching experience as a basis for improving instructional practices of second language writing at a Japanese university context. In particular, the author will share her teaching approach and its results in developing students' academic research and writing prowess. Based on the classroom action research data obtained through students' surveys and interviews, this paper will draw on students' preferences as well as their responses to different modes and means of feedback. Additionally, a special emphasis will be given to a seven-week project the students had been involved in, and how it shaped students' confidence in using second language (L2) as a lingua franca. Finally, the grassroots approach to education in Japanese context will be accentuated as one of the potential pedagogical tool in the author's teaching approach.

Key words: grassroots approach, peer feedback, L2 academic writing, motivational and demotivational factors, process writing.

What is exploratory teaching? What it means to be an exploratory teacher? The research shows that it is not a new concept, but the one that has been around for many decades. The book "*Focus on the Language Classroom*" by Allwright and Bailey (1991) promotes exploratory teaching as a practical reality that mirrors what goes on in the classrooms. The authors define exploratory teaching as "teaching that not only tries out new ideas but that also tries to learn as much as possible from doing so" (p. 197). This book is very valuable in that it promotes three essential components pertaining to exploratory teaching: 1) there is a great deal to be learned from the results of the research that has been so far; 2) there is even more to learn from the procedures of classroom research; 3) teachers, researchers and learners have a lot in common and therefore can learn a great deal form each other.

The main tenet of the exploratory teaching is that "the teacher is the researcher's link with learners, and also the learner's link with research" (Allwright & Bailey, 1991, p. 197). This book served as a trigger for my reflective teaching in pursuit of effective ways of teaching academic writing skills to Japanese university students.

Literature Review

One of the major contribution of second language (L2) acquisition research over the last fifty years or so has been to question the importance of language pedagogy traditionally attached to second language writing. Controlled composition, the paragraph pattern approach and the process approach have been used as the mainstream approaches to ESL writing, where more focus has been placed on the writer. However, the proponents of an English for academic purposes approach suggested shifting the emphasis in ESL writing research and instruction from the writer to the reader. Other researchers and practitioners of English writing

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pinpointed a number of variables that could potentially affect the development of academic writing fluency, (i.e., linguistic variables, rhetorical variables, cultural expectations, nationality, L1 interference and the writer's knowledge of the subject matter). Further, the researchers argued that these variables have become the perennial dilemmas in teaching second language writing where academic discourse genres and the range and nature of academic writing tasks have become the crucial focus of instruction in writing English for academic purposes. Academic writing is viewed as "a communicative social act" (Reid, 2001, p. 29) where most courses focus on classroom community and student responsibility through peer response activities. Teachers design curriculums based on a balance of institutional program and student needs rather than around dogmatic theories and approaches.

Curriculum Overview

The overall aim of the academic writing course curriculum is to help students develop their academic literacy in English, i.e. by being able to utilize English for enhancing their knowledge of social, political, and global issues and implementing this knowledge in written discourses. The primary goal of this curriculum is for teachers to help students develop their ease and confidence in using English, mastery of the research process and content, clarity in expressing ideas in speaking and writing, and critically evaluating and comprehending issues.

The principal processes highlighted in the curriculum target the development of students' skills in academic writing literacy, that is to say, organizing, researching, gathering, exchanging, analyzing, and explaining information and ideas on the chosen topic.

To better develop academic literacy, key activities are usually reinforced through repetitive cycles, i.e. individually, in pairs, or in groups of three. These include but do not limit: explaining notes, brainstorming, outlining, mind-mapping, identifying issues and questions for research, presenting key points and issues from research, ascertaining and reading/listening to information sources, paraphrasing and summarizing information sources, and making and re-organizing notes on information sources.

At the conclusion of the course, students should be able to learn how to employ heuristic strategies in producing two well-researched academic papers of different genres. Their finished products (two academic research papers) are further exposed to multiple reading audiences: peers, and the instructor. To sum it up, the process approach to writing lies at the heart of the curriculum for the writing course: *Prewrite, Organize, Write, Evaluate, Rewrite* (Kluge & Taylor, 2007, p. 164).

Data and Setting

All of the 24 students enrolled in the writing course described in this paper were second-year undergraduate students at a university in the Tokyo area. During the first year of university studies, they were all enrolled in a writing course that focused on the development of students' academic writing skills. In terms of their English capabilities, most of the class members could be ranked in English language proficiency levels of upper intermediate to advanced. Based on specific needs analyses and the class survey results, all of the students expressed an interest in improving their academic writing skills and improving their research skills necessary to incorporate researched data in their writing projects. Further, fourteen of 24 students had emphasized that the areas they wished to improve most were their deficient skills in coherence and cohesiveness in ESL writing, a lack of academic vocabulary repertoire, the inability to use complex sentences in their writing, a tendency to "use simple words" in their final written products, and difficulties in identifying reliable sources for their research.

Teaching approach

Attitudes and approaches toward teaching L2 writing have been a source of debate among second language acquisition (SLA) and second language writing scholars for more than two decades. However, controversies are still abound as to which formula practicing teachers should select for the L2 writing teaching approach. Silva and Matsuda (2002) inspired us to decide for ourselves "what makes sense for our students" (p. 264), and J.D. Brown (1995, p.17) advocated *eclecticism* defining it as "the practice of making informed choices among the available approaches, syllabuses, techniques, and exercises in order to adapt to a particular group of students in a particular situation for the purposes of most effectively and efficiently helping them to learn a foreign language." Brown (1995) further posited that all teaching professionals should use the magic three in their instruction: *adapt, adopt*, and *develop* with regards to the teaching materials, thereby, ensuring effective instruction to a particular group of L2 learners.

Applying these precepts in a practical teaching environment with L2 learners, I normally begin my classes by conducting needs analysis based on the democratic philosophy. In my experience, I have found this approach to be highly effective since it is based on "any change to a program that is desired by a majority of the group involved" (Brown, 1995, p. 39). Using the data from the needs analysis, I designed a syllabus that would suit every learner's needs. Since I am a strong advocate of a learner-centered teaching approach, I assumed that it would be appropriate applying this approach in this particular teaching context. However, after a few of classes, a male student approached me with the request that class instruction be altered to reflect the western style of writing. His argument was based on the fact that most students were more comfortable and familiar with the ***ki-shoo-ten-ketsu*** structure of Japanese L1 writing. He also explained that Japanese essays are organized inductively whereas English essays are organized deductively. This has brought me to the contrastive rhetoric (CR) where Kaplan (1966, 2005) insisted that different languages have diverse patterns of written discourse. The English written discourse was identified as linear, whereas Oriental written discourse was described as proceeding in an elliptical manner. However, Casanave (2004) criticized Kaplan's arguments and insisted that L2 writing teachers should pursue one of the most important applications of CR: reader expectations. She further suggested that L2 writing teachers should definitely learn writer's instructional backgrounds, reader's expectations, and the major differences in L1 and L2 texts. In concluding her argument, Casanave (2004, p. 53) maintained, "languages and cultures can not prefer anything, nor is it languages that are inherently direct or indirect. It is people who prefer things, with languages, used directly or indirectly, as a vehicle for our preferences."

This was indeed a wake up call for me never to make false assumptions about any group of L2 learners' learning styles or preferences. Thanks to my student's "request", I could clearly see that the male student spoke on behalf of the majority of the students. Pursuing this request, I planned every class carefully and kept a reflective journal where I would make notes of what "worked" and/or did not "work" in the class with this particular group of learners. I have greatly benefitted through recording the 'in-class-findings' in the journal in that this approach provides an ongoing means to evaluate the course. Through the notes and reflections, I could make essential changes to the writing instruction process and make learning and teaching reciprocal. I continually needed my students' feedback to learn how to optimally manage the classes. For example, students were asked to bring to the class essays written in L1 to be compared with essays written in a target language. Students were given rubrics for comparison where they were asked to comment on the differences and similarities of L1 and L2 texts. This training has benefitted both students and the teacher in comparing, contrasting, and comprehending the structure and organization of Japanese and English discourse of a particular academic genre. Additionally, a couple of students asked me to teach them the rules of English writing punctuation, in particular, the usage of semicolons and colons which very often appear to be confusing to L2 learners. Further, the activity that most students regarded to be the most effecting one was the training in

using formal language in academic writing. Most students were able to self-edit their papers thanks to the skills they had acquired during the in-class direct teaching of paraphrasing and using formal language in their academic writing. I would definitely recommend the textbook "*Basic Steps to Writing Research Papers*" written by Kluge and Taylor (2007) who have a twenty-year teaching experience of EFL writing in Japanese university contexts. In particular, ESL teachers could greatly benefit by using the handouts (e.g. pp. 73, 79, and 129) for providing effective training to their students.

My students taught me that despite the popularity of an approach, technique or a particular pedagogical tool, an effective teacher should always be able to make informed decisions pertaining to a particular group of L2 learners.

Writing Skills Checklist Implemented Throughout the Course

The so-called 'process approach' to writing instruction has been advocated by numerous academics (Matsuda, 2003; Casanave, 2004; Hedgecock, 2005; Silva and Leki, 2004) as a path to the final product. H.D. Brown (2007, p. 3933) posited that "process is not the end; it is the means to the end." Kroll (2001) defined "process approach" to second language writing as the process when student writers "engage in their writing tasks through a *cyclical* approach rather than through a single-shot approach" (p. 219). To provide my students with efficient and effective instruction to acquire skills in becoming better writers in a target language, I followed the writing skills checklist in my teaching which have proved to be effective in laying the foundation for enhancing my students' motivation to develop autonomous skills, building their confidence in discovering their own voice through meaningful writing, and motivating and sustaining the motivation throughout the process of writing. I followed Shih's (1986) guidelines to the process approach in writing instruction at a tertiary level:

a) Provide opportunities for self-expression and autonomy

b) Integrate reading and writing activities

c) Teach learners to use a variety of heuristic techniques

d) Encourage pre-writing planning

e) Teach paragraph and discourse structure: analyzing sample works written by their seniors

f) Include a grammatical component: formal language used in academic writing; in-class activity

g) Develop writing fluency by enabling students to produce a variety of written discourse genres

h) Provide opportunities for pair and group work; try to alert students to the benefits of cooperative and collaborative learning

i) Provide students with a proper audience

j) Focus on process writing

k) Help students build strategies for effective writing

l) Provide students with the time to write and rewrite

m) Place central importance on the process of revision

n) Allow students to discover what THEY want to write about

o) Provide feedback from both peers and an instructor

The Grassroots Approach to Building Rapport with Students

One more salient feature worth adding to the above checklist is the *grassroots approach* to writing instruction. What is the grassroots approach and how does it fit into the EFL Japanese context? The grassroots of an organization or movement are the ordinary people who form the main part of it, rather than its leaders. The grassroots approach to education allows teachers to focus on *learners* as being the essential foundation

of an educational program. It enables a teacher to become a facilitator of learning by providing L2 learners with unequivocal writing instruction throughout the program. By employing the grassroots approach in one's class, educators suppress their dominant roles in order to become facilitators and co-learners; at the same time, learners are elevated to assume more responsibility and control of their learning.

The pith of the approach has a positive connotation and could be formulated in three words: *melt*, *mould* and *ignite* (Griffin, 1976). I would equate teaching with persuasion. Who is a teacher? It is surely someone who follows the three pillars of persuasion: *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. Our students see us as an "exemplary someone" who possesses credibility, is passionate about teaching, and someone who uses logic in providing learners with efficient instruction. Teachers are continual persuaders. Applying persuasion in a classroom is like making a candle: melt, mould, harden and ignite.

Melt

When teaching professionals meet a group of learners for the first time, they all try to assure students that the course they have enrolled in will enable them to hone their skills and harness their prowess of a subject matter. I usually assure my students that I do respect and value their opinions and consider them to be responsible adults who are ready to invest their time and effort in fulfilling the requirements of the course.

Some students come to the class with preconceptions that "their writing skills are very poor, and despite the grueling efforts that they may make, their grades will be low." (Kotaro, EFL student) That is why it is up to a teacher to *melt* these negative beliefs about L2 writing and assist learners to form positive learning experiences by "throwing them into a melting pot" which is a positive classroom atmosphere we create. My experience with this approach has shown me that a gentle but persistent approach will always yield appreciable results.

Mould

To trust their teachers, learners should be convinced of their competency. They do anticipate teachers to provide them with accurate and clear information and instructions related to the course. As professionals, we must know what our students' needs are. In my teaching I always try to present the goals of the course by answering basic questions (5Ws and H). To assure students of the course value, I always show them the real, positive results achieved by the students previously enrolled in the course. Students are exposed to a variety of written discourse produced by their seniors enrolled in the course a year or two earlier. By being able to view, read and discuss sample papers, learners can clearly see the degree to which papers vary in length, content and the writing style. This experience gives them a clearer picture of what will be expected of them by the end of the course.

Harden and Ignite

In order to be able to harden and ignite students to take actions by assuming responsibilities for their commitment to course work, learners should believe in a teacher's cause, and most importantly believe in themselves: it is crucial for teachers to build rapport with students by actually incorporating passionate teaching, expressing confidence in their students' success, reminding students that their active participation in class activities is vital to the program, and by assuring them that the skills they will have learned by the end of the course, will assist them throughout their university studies and professional careers. In the words of one of my students in a survey, "*I felt like a caterpillar when I joined this class, however, I turned into a butterfly when I left it.*" (Tomoko, EFL student)

Even though the grassroots approach in ESL instruction is still in its infancy, based on one-year classroom research data, the results have shown that learners appreciated instructor's teaching approach and have commented on it through anonymous questionnaires and surveys conducted among the students by an instructor who has not met them previously. The data yielded provided me with an invaluable feedback in an ongoing course evaluation and its instruction.

Feedback: modes, means, and rationale

More recently, there has been an ongoing debate pertaining to the potential effect of the feedback in second language writing: its rationale, the means, and the targets of feedback. This section will illustrate types of activities, pedagogical tools and techniques that contributed to students' writing skills development. Additionally, it will report on the results of students' preferences and their reactions to peer vs. teacher provided feedback to their written assignments.

In the past twenty years, there has been a transformation in the way feedback in second language writing is conceptualized and implemented. Rather than summative, feedback now tends to be regarded essentially as formative; rather than a teaching methodology, current thinking holds it to be an act of communication situated in specific cultural, institutional and interpersonal contexts (Hyland 2006, 2009). However, many feedback-related issues still remain unresolved, and controversies are abound (Casanave, 2004). For instance, is grammar feedback useless (Truscott, 1996) or worthwhile (Ferris, 1999)? Does indirect feedback raise students' awareness of problems more than direct feedback (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005)? Should teachers focus on global rather than local errors (Santos, 1988), face-to-face oral feedback or written (Ferris, 2003; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1988), native-speaker standard of writing or local norms (Matsuda & Cox, 2011)?

At present, more and more teachers of second language writing have begun to focus on students' preferences for feedback, pedagogical approaches and materials in L2 writing, and evaluation techniques. The rationale is to identify potential reasons behind the effects of differential feedback messages as well as to get a clear idea on students' perspectives on what they consider as the most valuable information. Hyland and Hyland (2006, p. 2) presented a number of salient issues pertaining to the role of feedback in second language learning: 1) kinds of feedback that are most appropriate in different contexts; b) the most effective teacher practices; c) students' perceptions and responses to feedback; d) cultural factors that influence responses; e) does feedback improve student writing in the long term?

Peer Feedback

Peer feedback and input to each other is a very complex process requiring EFL writing teachers to provide learners with adequate training and clear goals. It is very important for a teacher to establish students' positive attitudes towards peer response from the very beginning of the course. My experience has taught me that advanced students in EFL writing course think that it is teachers' job to read and respond to students' written discourse. Some students commented that it was a waste of time reading and responding to each other's papers. In addition, students with weaker writing skills reported that peer reading papers was challenging and time-consuming. They explained that they had to constantly refer to the dictionary which somewhat slowed the process and made the task too difficult to accomplish. In such cases, students simply wrote a couple of sentences commenting on the length of the paper rather than on its content. A quote from one male student enrolled in the writing course illustrates the said: " *I think this paper is good because it shows the problem and solution for it clearly, and has good reasons to make this solution. Moreover it has some objective opinion and data. However, this paper is difficult to read; therefore you should use more understandable expressions.*" (Yuki's response to a paper)

Another important finding I have come across in my teaching was students' cultural background factor, which has revealed interesting phenomenon in the classroom: students were not used to "openly criticize" each other's paper as it is not a common practice in Japanese educational institutions. Hence, some comments were very general and did not necessarily provide a constructive and valuable feedback for making revisions in a paper. It was further revealed that both male and female students were very careful not to hurt each other's feelings. Empathy was a driving force in formulating peer comments, which can be attributed to Japanese way of social norms in communication. The following quote illustrates student's attitude toward giving feedback to his peer: " *Your paper is clear and easy to understand, and includes much information. I can know bad and good points of the topic. In the introduction, you wrote what you discuss clearly, so it is easy to understand and interesting.*" (Masayuki's feedback to his peer)

To change students' beliefs about peer feedback, I have decided to provide my students with some training: (e.g. students were trained to read and respond to other students' papers by reviewing research papers and problem-solution reports written by students in previous classes). Also, students were provided with a peer response sheet (adapted from Oshima & Hogue, 2013) where they were asked to make relevant comments. They were asked to write their comments in either L1 or L2. Their comments were then discussed in the class where each student had a chance to report on his/her peer response. The training sessions continued weekly during the first seven weeks of the semester with the gradual decrease in the second half of the semester. The results of the training created a positive atmosphere for students to comment on each other's papers without fear of losing face or hurting each other feelings. Interestingly, through examining students' peer responses, I found that students' comments were more straightforward than those of the teacher's. Students reported that they wanted their peers to make relevant revisions so that when they have read it next time, it would be more interesting to learn about the researched issues. As it was earlier noted in this paper, students brainstormed and narrowed down research topics in dyads and groups, which made paper content more engaging and relevant to this particular group of learners. To sum it up, the training in providing peer feedback to each other had a crucial impact on students in that it buttressed its meaning and value in the planning, revising, and the writing process. "Participants' identities and roles, the place that feedback has in instruction, the channel that is employed, and the goals students are trying to achieve in learning to write in a foreign language are all important aspects of feedback environment" (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 14).

Teacher Feedback to L2 Writers

Why do students need feedback? What kind of feedback do they prefer? What is their ideal feedback? Do teachers' comments and students' expectations coincide? What types of feedback do native and non-native teachers of L2 writing prefer to provide their students with, and why? These questions present a dilemma that most L2 writing researchers and teachers have been trying tackle for the past two decades or so.

Teacher feedback is a very important pedagogical tool, especially in the drafting-rewriting cycle, coming after the peer-review draft. It provides writers with a more detailed assessment of the writing: comments are made on the strengths of the paper and suggestions are given on possible improvements. In my own teaching practice, I also include praise as an important pedagogical technique to raise students' motivation and encourage students with weaker writing skills. The reason for including praise in my comments was based on a student survey response where a male student reported, "*I need my teacher to praise me. If I am praised I can do my best and my motivation to improve is always high.*" (Yuki's survey response)

Throughout my teaching experience of academic writing at Japanese universities, one of the most frequent features pointed out by students as their primary preference for the feedback, was grammar correction. Students already had built-in preconceptions that if their written products lacked any grammar mistakes, it would meet the criteria to get an A grade for the course. I provided students with a variety of feedback em-

ploying coded comments on grammar and collocations, focusing on global rather than local errors, pointing out strengths and weaknesses of the organization and structure, advising students how to make the papers reader-centered, and identifying research questions related to the discourse of a genre in question. It was revealed that some students lacked metalinguistic knowledge to comprehend my feedback and make relevant corrections or revisions in their future drafts. It was also revealed that even some advanced students occasionally were not able to follow the comments that I had provided them with on their earlier drafts. To address this problem, I decided to use a face-to-face conferencing where I could provide oral feedback to my students on their progress.

Teacher-Student Conferencing

Research in EFL writing indicates that, to be effective, feedback should be provided in a variety of modes, be focused on individual variables and preferences, and serve as the pedagogical tool for learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Peterson, 2008). The axis around which teacher-student conferencing revolves is the Vygotskian concept of *scaffolding* providing a solid platform for the dialogue between a teacher and student. To ensure efficient learning outcome as a result of this dialogue, teacher-student conferences should be carefully planned and delivered. One of the most salient features that Ferris (2006) endorsed is the right timing for the conferencing. She insisted that earlier teacher-student conferencing is more productive and efficient in that students could make revisions and corrections during the process of writing rather than waiting for the final draft.

What has worked in my class? Prior to the conferencing, students were given a rubric where they are asked to prepare a list of questions pertaining to their piece of writing. Some students in my class asked me whether they could use L1 during the meeting in case they could not make themselves understood in L2. Surprisingly, it was ascertained that most students felt comfortable using L1 during the conferencing, reporting later that it was easier for them to use L1 metalinguistic knowledge to clarify comments and feedback provided by the instructor. As the class comprised of 24 students, each student was given 5-7 minutes to discuss issues pertaining to their writing. Throughout the semester, each student had a chance to have a conference with the instructor four times. Those students who could not attend the sessions due to a variety of reasons were asked to attend a teacher-student conference after classes. After the conferencing, students were required to reflect on the outcomes and record their reflections in their learning logs, which were a part of the assessment portfolio. During the conferencing, I usually made notes about each student's individual learning variables; however, using a voice recorder to record the dialogue has proved to be most effective. I could easily transfer the files to my personal computer and keep the record of each student's conversations. These records helped me to prepare for the next meeting and also see how each student's progressed throughout the course. I would definitely recommend this procedure to EFL writing teachers for the pedagogical purposes.

Providing opportunities to use English in meaningful communication

A Ten-Week E-mail Project between Japanese and Vietnamese University Students

At the beginning of the second semester, a questionnaire was given to students enrolled in the academic writing course to ascertain the frequency they have used English outside the university classroom context. In particular, the focus was placed on the production of any written discourse in English. Some 90% of the students answered that they hardly ever used English outside the classroom with the remaining 10% responding that they sometimes used English to chat online with their foreign friends. With an abundance of online communication technology currently available, such as VoIP and social networks (e.g. Whatsup, Viber, Line,

Facebook), more and more ESL learners find these sources to be rather effective in improving their writing skills in English. Some of the students responded that they have used VoIP to communicate with their foreign friends in English; however, the majority of the group responded that they had experienced language anxiety when communicating with native English speakers.

To enable students to conquer language anxiety issue, an online exchange project was established between the Japanese and Vietnamese university students. The project has been successfully established thanks to my Vietnamese coworker whom I met in 2010 as one of the attendees of my workshop at Hue University for Foreign Languages. If it had not been for her assistance and passion in smoothing all the technical issues, the project would not have succeed.

There were several reasons why I wanted my students to participate in the project: a chance to *use* L2 in meaningful written discourse; a significant decrease of language anxiety since none of the project participants were native speakers of English; an opportunity to get first-hand information pertaining to their research topic from their Vietnamese peers; personalized communication. These factors were coupled with the use of English in a real life situational context; using it as a lingua franca to ensure successful communication on an international level, and to develop students' voice and identity in digitally produced written discourse. How can we define *voice* in EFL writing? Matsuda (2001, p. 41) defined voice as "the amalgamative effect of the use of discursive and non-discursive features that language users choose deliberately or otherwise, from socially available yet ever-changing repertoires." More recently, Matsuda (2011, p. 2) argued that digital writing contributes to the development of academic writing by a) helping students develop a broader repertoire of discursive and non-discursive resources; b) kindle students' awareness of the complexity of decisions involved in written communication; c) help writing teachers reflect on the complexity of writing for a real audience by examining students' digital writing.

The Project and Participants

The online exchange project between Japanese and Vietnamese university students was first established by the author of this paper who was teaching academic writing at a university in Tokyo (hereinafter referred as *A* University) to enable her students to use L2 in real life, meaningful communication. The project continued for seven weeks during 2016 and involved 24 students from *A* University and 24 students from *B* University in Vietnam. The student participants in both Vietnam and Japan represented a homogeneous mix for the most part (except for a few international students studying in Japan) who had been studying English in EFL contexts. The participants in *B* University in Vietnam were second year students majoring in English, whereas the participants in *A* University in Japan were second year students majoring business communication. It has been initially planned to randomly pair students with assigned pen pal partners, however, Japanese students requested to be paired with the pen pal partners of different gender. The participants of the project were asked to send one e-mail a week to their pen pal partners and the project lasted for seven weeks. The requirement of the project established by both teachers was that when an e-mail was sent to a pen pal, it was to be send simultaneously by being carbon copied (cc-ed) to an administrative account so that the instructors could check students' progress. The procedure was also requisite for both Vietnamese and Japanese students to research the information pertaining to the e-mail content and make sure that the pen pal partner promptly received answers to their questions. By the end of the project, the participants in *A* University in Japan were asked to write a research paper and in a three-minute presentation, inform the class of the results of their research. The research paper and presentation were supposed to be based on the findings from the data obtained through the online project in addition to an individual research. All students in *A* University were requested to maintain a research journal to reflect on their online communication with their peers in Vietnam, followed up by the in-class discussions where students discussed the content-obligatory vocabulary, collocations and phrases they

have learned and utilized in their reflection notes. The topics discussed throughout the project included so-
cial, political, cultural and educational issues. The topics have been negotiated, selected (see Table 1 below)
and mutually agreed upon by both participants from *A* and *B* Universities. At the end of the project, students
were given a 10-item questionnaire where they were asked to evaluate the effects of the project in various
aspects such as motivation, learner autonomy, building confidence, linguistic skills, and using L2 as a lingua
franca for communication purposes (see Appendix 1).

Table 1 Topics discussed and researched in e-mail exchanges selected by students

Week 1	Education system in your country
Week 2	The most popular university major in your country
Week 3	Social and political problems existing in your country at present
Week 4	Judicial system in your country
Week 5	English education system in your country
Week 6	Job availability in your country
Week 7	Recommended sites to visit in your country

Findings

The online exchange project between the Japanese and Vietnamese university students has yielded positive
results in that it: a) provided a successful environment for meaningful communication; b) enabled students
to use a target language as a lingua franca; c) decreased language anxiety in Japanese students; d) encour-
aged learners' autonomy throughout the project; e) transformed students' beliefs on L2 writing; f) raised
participants' awareness of the importance of deploying linguistic resources to impart grammatically correct
messages to their interlocutor; g) built up students' confidence in producing written discourse for successful
and meaningful communication; h) strengthened students' communicative competence of a target language.
Moreover, this project provided participants with an opportunity to expand their content knowledge pertain-
ing to the discussed topics and widen their vocabulary repertoire in English. In addition, it was revealed
through surveys and questionnaires that students had realized the importance of using dictionaries as well as
collocations knowledge to ensure a successful communication in a target language.

Despite the significant positive effects the project had on developing students' communicative competence
in producing communicable written discourse, project participants singled out several minor detrimental
disadvantages. The instructor who was teaching students in *B* University in Vietnam described her students'
English proficiency level ranging from low to high intermediate; however, throughout the project a few Japa-
nese students complained that their peers in Vietnam had better skills in L2 writing. By analyzing students'
digitally written discourse, it was ascertained that Vietnamese students' English proficiency level was more
advanced compared to the Japanese students: the Vietnamese students were capable of producing sentence
structures which were more complex- syntactically, semantically, and morphologically than those of the
students in *A* University in Japan. Arguably, this may be due to the fact that students in *B* University in Viet-
nam majored in English; hence their English proficiency was somewhat higher compared to the students in
A University in Japan. Additionally, it was revealed that some participants' late replies inhibited successful
communication by demotivating other interlocutors. Furthermore, survey results indicated that one Japanese
male student participant had difficulty in using computer since his skill in using English keyboard was very
low. He reported that it was very stressful for him to keep up with his peer in Vietnam. One female student
commented that it took her almost one hour to write an e-mail to her pen pal in Vietnam, since she had to refer
to the dictionary constantly. She explained that she wanted her e-mail to be perfect and free of any grammar
or spelling mistakes. Through examining Japanese students' written discourse one common occurrence has
been singled out: "the apologizing factor". It was noticed in the e-mails of 17 Japanese participants that they

constantly apologized for their "bad English". It could be suggested that this factor may reflect Japanese cultural norms where people are usually very modest and shy about their true skills and abilities. In addition to the said findings, another interesting phenomenon has been discovered through a focus group discussion: some Japanese students expressed difficulty in lack of knowledge of their own culture rather than the ability to explain it in English. As a result of this online exchange project, many students commented that they could not only learn about Vietnamese culture but also significantly deepen knowledge about their own culture.

Despite the above-mentioned advantages and disadvantages resulted through the online exchange project between Japanese and Vietnamese university students, it was revealed that the majority of the participants enjoyed an opportunity to communicate with their peers in English. This project engaged all the students in a meaningful communication and sustained and retained students' motivation in its successful completion.

Conclusion and Discussion

Based on the above-mentioned description of reflective teaching, the author of this paper concludes that to successfully teach second language learners how to conduct research and write academic papers, a teacher should encourage, guide, and instruct students to write their academic papers in steps. Further, after each major step, teacher- student conference should be hold with each student to identify students' concerns and/or misunderstandings. Also, a teacher should guide students' writing in stages rather than waiting until the students have spent considerable time and effort in progressing in a direction that was erroneous.

Secondly, the results of the action research based on the classroom data obtained through surveys, questionnaires, and interviews illustrated that advanced students had negative views pertaining to receiving peer feedback from the students with lower English proficiency level and also being enrolled in a course where students L2 writing skills varied. This was a demotivating factor in the classroom setting. That is why it is very important for teachers to take into consideration group dynamics and pair up students carefully.

Thirdly, it was revealed that students preferred using L1 during the conferencing regardless of their English proficiency level. This fact indicates that a more detailed research pertaining to this issue would benefit ESL writing teachers to enhance the effectiveness of teacher-student conferencing. In addition, the grassroots approach to teaching EFL writing course has proved to be very effective for this particular group of students. However, as Allwright and Bailey (1991) rightly acknowledged, "the extraordinary complexity of what happens in language classrooms makes it impossible to come to any simple straightforward conclusions" (p. 195). It is up to teachers to continue exploring what works and/or what does not for a particular group of learners in specific teaching contexts. Furthermore, an online exchange project between Japanese and Vietnamese university students provided students with an opportunity to use L2 in meaningful communication. The project had a lasting effect on participants in that it facilitated the development of students' communicative competence skills, decreased language anxiety among Japanese students, built up students' confidence in using a target language in real life situations, and developed students' cross-cultural pragmatic competence required for the successful communication on the international level.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire

Your feedback is greatly appreciated. Thank you very much for your time and effort.

1. Did you enjoy the project? If yes/no, why?
2. What difficulties/challenges have you experienced during the communication?
3. Have you noticed any improvements in your writing?
4. Have you received any support/feedback from your instructor during the project?
5. Did this project motivate you to study English harder?
6. What do you think about the structure/organization of this project? What changes would you recommend to be made in the future? Why?
7. Would you like to have pen pals from English speaking countries? If yes/no, why?
8. How do you think this project changed your views on Vietnam/Vietnamese young generation?
9. What are your thoughts on the length of the project? Do you think it was too long/short?
10. What would you recommend to the future participants of this project?