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Literacy Autobiography in EFL Contexts: Investigating Japanese Student Language Learning Experiences

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The current study investigates the value of writing literacy autobiographies in the Japanese EFL context. This study employs Pavlenko's (2007) methodological framework, using autobiographic narratives as data, and investigates six Japanese EFL students' L2 learning experiences through their literacy autobiographies. The study showed that literacy autobiographies written by the participants revealed four problems in their L2 learning: pronunciations, grammatical knowledge, creating English sentences, and learning approaches. It also revealed that literacy autobiographies described problems and difficulties that Japanese students encountered in their learning processes. In this sense, writing literacy autobiographies was a useful task for the students not only to reflect on their learning histories but to explore more effective ways to learn English as life-long learners.

INTRODUCTION

A literacy autobiography is viewed as an appropriate research method in the field of applied linguistics. Specifically, using autobiographical narratives is helpful to elucidate learners' journeys in second language (L2) acquisition and teachers' experiences in L2 learning contexts. Previous studies of literacy autobiographies reflect a view of L2 learners' unique experiences of literacy and of in-service teachers' experiences in L2 classrooms (Belcher & Connor, 2001; Blanton, Kroll, Cumming, Erickson, Johns, Leki, Reid, & Silva, 2002; Johnson & Golombek, 2002). As Belcher and Connor point out, an autobiography is seen as "providing windows on learners' metalinguistic awareness, capable of telling us much about their conscious use of language learning strategies" (pp. 3-4). Thus, literacy autobiographies can be a valuable data source to give a descriptive analysis in L2 contexts (Pavlenko, 2007).

However, there is scant reporting on the relationship between literacy autobiographies and English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) students. Exploring this research issue will suggest that autobiographical writing helps language learners to understand problems or struggles in their language learning process and explore more effective ways to learn English as life-long learners. These findings will be employed to propose practical guidelines for teaching literacy autobiographies, in a teacher-training program, as a way for pre-service teachers to consider more efficient approaches to teaching and learning English.

This paper discusses the potential contribution of writing literacy

autobiographies in narratives to L2 education and the teachability of literacy autobiographies in the EFL classroom. First, it reviews previous studies of literacy autobiographies in L2 contexts. Secondly, it describes a case study of literacy autobiographies and Japanese EFL students. The main objective of the current study was to use literacy autobiographies written by Japanese EFL students as data to identify what problems and issues they encountered in their L2 learning process. In so doing, this paper makes contributions to the development of an awareness of teaching literacy autobiographies in the L2 classroom.

LITERACY AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN L2 CONTEXTS

Writing literacy autobiographies allows learners to understand their learning processes to show "their insider's view of the processes of language learning, attrition, and use" (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 165). There were few studies which addressed the use of literacy autobiographies in L2 professional references in the 1990s; however, research on L2 students' literacy development has flourished since the early 2000s. For the purpose of understanding the processes of L2 literacy with a critical eye, previous studies highlighted how the individual went through difficulties and problems to improve the L2 literacy skills. For instance, Fujieda (2001) examined his own experiences of reading and writing in Japanese and English. He reflected on his numerous biliteracy activities, events, and practices inside and outside the school. Fujieda's study revealed that literacy autobiographies provided a chance to realize his development of language proficiencies as a language learner.

Belcher and Connor (2001) collected literacy autobiographies of distinguished scholars. The scholars elucidated their unique experiences in their L2 or multiple languages. From the perspectives of L2 writing scholarship, Belcher and Connor argue that literacy autobiography is significant for pedagogy and research because it enables learners to raise their metalinguistic awareness by reflecting on various language learning strategies.

Literacy autobiographies have been applied to the area of teaching L2 composition and L2 education. Collections of teachers' autobiographical narratives focused on teaching experiences of diverse learning settings and presented teachers' ways of knowing their profession. Blanton et al. (2002) illustrated several episodes of teaching writing to ESL students. The stories of teaching L2 writing shared by scholars contributed to wider discussions on the problems and potential ways of teaching writing in L2 settings. Johnson and Golombek (2002) also investigated L2 teachers' autobiographies in order to find problems and concerns of teaching in different contexts and to construct teachers' professional knowledge and identities as L2 teaching professionals.

Moreover, the concept of literacy autobiographies has been widely accepted among L2 writing scholars. For example, Casanave and Vandrick (2003) emphasized the distinguished scholars' processes of publication, uncovering their "backstage problems or struggles" of publications. The collections of the authors' scholarly publication unpacked their processes, challenges, and conflicts to publish their work: how the scholars engaged in the systems of publication and how they achieved publication, negotiating with gatekeepers and publishing discourse

communities.

Recently, cross-cultural autobiographies have been used as a meaningful way to explore literacy events. Fujieda (2010) examined how he negotiated his identities to be an L2 writing teacher and researcher by reflecting on his L2 learning experiences. Fujieda's autobiography in narrative found that literacy autobiographies allow for reconstruction and negotiation of identity, reflecting the writer's values developed through real-life experiences. In Park's (2013) study, she investigated how she situated herself as a teacher, scholar, researcher, and Korean-American woman in American society through the analysis of poems of her life history. Through her autoethonographic-poetic research, Park emphasized the significance of using personal life stories as a way to examine the development of teacher educators in TESOL programs.

In this way, previous studies of literacy autobiographies focused mainly on researchers' and teachers' stories and experiences. However, very few empirical studies have reported on the use of literacy autobiographies written by L2 students. It is arguable whether having L2 (especially EFL) students write autobiographies is meaningful in the composition classroom. In order to evaluate autobiographical writing as a tool for L2 learning, the current study addressed the following two research questions:

1. How do Japanese EFL students describe their L2 learning process in their autobiographical texts?
2. What is the potential contribution of writing a literacy autobiography to L2 learning and teaching?

METHODS

Pavlenko (2007) argues that illustrating learners' reflective accounts of language learning provides a glimpse into their struggles, success, and/or development and offers a powerful underpinning for presenting their sense of self and identity. Based on Pavlenko's framework, the current study employed a qualitative research design to explore the participants' L2 learning experiences through their literacy autobiographies.

Participants

Participants in the current study were six Japanese undergraduate students (one male and five female) who registered in a Second Language Literacy course at a four-year private university. They were all English majors: four juniors and two sophomores. They had learned English for over seven years, starting in elementary school and junior high school (at the age of 11-13).

Data Collection

Data were collected in the 2013 spring semester. In the Second Language Literacy course, the participants were required to write their literacy autobiographies. The primary goal of this course requirement was to reflect on

and understand their literacy events and practices through their literacy autobiographies. During the semester, the participants made multiple drafts of their autobiographies. In the first three weeks, the participants reflected on and wrote their language learning experiences in elementary school. Then, they spent around six weeks writing up their literacy events in secondary school. Finally, they wrote their literacy experiences at the tertiary level for another three weeks. One of the investigators provided written feedback after the participants made a draft of their literacy practices at each educational level. After completing the full draft of literacy autobiographies, a peer response session was held at the end of the semester. Based on the peers and the teacher's written commentary, their drafts were revised. In this way, each of the participants produced their own literacy autobiographies, and these were collected as the primary data source.

Data Analysis

The data analysis employed the categorization of the participants' written texts following the methodological guidelines developed by Hanauer (2001) and Iida (2012). The analysis was comprised of three stages. The first stage involved the careful reading of all sentences in the six autobiographical essays. The purpose of this initial analysis was to create and propose a tentative coding system. The second stage was to develop a tentative coding system. During this analysis, the investigators subjected each sentence of the autobiographical texts with the coding system, and new categories were added to it as necessary. Doing so allowed for a clear distinction between categories. The third stage of analysis was to evaluate the reliability of the coding system. Both investigators independently re-analyzed and categorized all sentences using the coding system produced in the previous stage.

This coding system allowed for the creation of five categories concerning the participants' L2 learning: learning sources, tasks, purposes, environments, and problems. The current study focused on one of the categories, *problems*, and identified what problems or struggles the participants had in their learning process.

RESULTS

The results of the qualitative analysis of the participants' literacy autobiographies revealed four major problem areas in their L2 learning processes: pronunciation, grammatical knowledge, creating English sentences, and learning approaches. This section addresses each problem with examples and excerpts from the participants' autobiographies. All names shown in excerpts are pseudonyms.

The first problem is *pronunciation*. In the following excerpt, Kumi illustrates how challenging a task it is for her to pronounce the sounds /l/ and /r/ or /th/ and /f/ correctly.

> When I was an elementary school student, sometimes I sang the English alphabet
> song with my friends but it was not true alphabet pronunciation so I learned

these in junior high school. Now I remember I thought "R" and "L'" pronunciation was difficult because these sounds do not have in Japanese pronunciations. Moreover "th" and "f" was more difficult to read. For example, I read aloud "think" but my pronunciation was "sink" like Japanese. Even now, I think English pronunciation is very difficult...

Learning *grammatical knowledge* is the second problem. It seems difficult for L2 learners to understand new grammatical knowledge of the target language when the concept does not exist in their first language. In the following excerpt, Kana explains her struggle and difficulty in understanding the notion of present perfect tense in English grammar.

> The most awkward grammar to understand was the same as reading; understanding present perfect. In some cases, I have to use "have," and other cases "had," "had been," or "have been." I had answered a thousand of questions using enormous textbooks. I feel embarrassed, however still now I am not able to use present perfect correctly.

Kana continues to explain how she tried her best to understand the concept of present perfect. She studied it with a workbook and practiced over and over again.

> When I solved [answered] many questions [of present perfect] that concerned with grammar using workbooks, it was hard for me to make right answers. I tried very hard to remember the rule of the present perfect, but it was not easy. To overcome the difficulty [in understanding the grammatical rules], I kept studying with the workbooks. Sometimes I stayed up late at midnight to solve [answer] questions of grammar, especially when it was close to take the examination of the semester. Making sentences with correct grammar was always related to taking tests. If I misunderstood the grammar, I would get lower ranking of all the students. (The words and phrases in square brackets, here and below, have been added for clarity.)

The third problem in L2 learning experiences is related to the difficulty of *constructing sentences* (or to study sentence structures) in English. The following excerpt shows how the task of putting words in correct order is challenging to Kana.

> ... I tried very hard to make correct sentences from the words which were not in order, but it was too hard for me to make the answers. This was because a lot of words which were not in order were unknown for me. There were some words that I knew, but still I could see many words that I do not know. This learning process made my motivation to learn English down. However if I was able to stand this learning process, I could get higher ranking of all of the students [in my high school class].

Kana's autobiography also addressed the issue of the relationship between the level of task difficulty and her L2 proficiency. She explained the task in which she needed to place several words in the right order, but a lot of unfamiliar words in the exercise made it difficult for her to complete the task. This refers to her

assigned task being beyond her L2 proficiency level. As a result, the task demotivated her to continue to study English.

The fourth problem is related to *L2 learning approaches*. Learning styles or approaches vary from one learner to another, depending on his or her language aptitude, proficiency level, and/or purpose of language learning. However, one of the common and well-used learning approaches among Japanese students is to learn L2 linguistic knowledge by heart. Mamoru addresses this issue in the following excerpt:

> This was not the requirement or assignment from the school, but helpful for the English class – I tried to *remember* English sentences. This does not only mean that I *remembered* English idioms, but also literally *memorize* English sentences like "I am a junior high school student." I did not like *remembering* English grammars properly, but I tried to acquire English grammars as I *remember* English sentences instead. This worked perfectly to me, and soon I became be able to get high score on English tests. The purpose of this is to acquire English or other languages' grammar of course. But I know it is good to *remember* grammars using grammatical terms. I still use this technique to understand foreign languages' grammars, but if I am told to explain more specifically, I would not be able to teach anyone. (Emphasis added.)

As can be seen in the above excerpt, Mamoru's learning approach depends heavily on input. In this short narrative, he used the word *remember* five times and *memorize* once. This indicates how important and meaningful it was for him to learn linguistic knowledge in his L2 learning process. In fact, it seems that he was satisfied with his memorization-based learning approach because he could score higher points on English tests, and it was good enough for him to make himself understood. In this sense, memorization was a useful approach to Mamoru.

DISCUSSION

The current study examines six Japanese EFL students' L2 learning experiences through their literacy autobiographies. Literacy autobiographies written by Japanese students describe some common characteristics in their L2 learning processes.

One of the features is that Japanese students were inclined to emphasize input rather than output in learning English. This is not surprising, but their literacy autobiographies presented very little description of how they used the target language. While this finding problematizes the limitation of language use outside the classroom, it clearly explains in what way students study English in the context: learning English by memorizing and remembering grammatical knowledge and vocabulary.

In addition, the literacy autobiographies showed that Japanese students focused more on accuracy than fluency in learning English. It seems that they tended to work on drill exercises to increase the accuracy of language use. As Kana mentioned, she needed to answer a lot of grammar questions in the workbook to gain a better understanding of the target grammar (e.g., present

perfect). Her literacy autobiography addressed the issue of grammar learning and EFL learners: Just understanding the *form* including the grammar rule is not enough to develop grammatical knowledge; rather it is important for her to understand the notion and *function* of the target grammar. As Keith and Iida (2014) argue, explicit grammar instruction can be more necessary or meaningful for Japanese students in order to develop the accurate use of the target grammar.

Another common feature that Japanese students shared is the purpose of English language learning: learning for English proficiency tests. Literacy autobiographies written by Kana and Mamoru clearly explain how the factor of English tests affected their learning approaches, emotions, and attitudes toward English language learning. In the case of Mamoru, one of his learning strategies, *memorization* helped him to score higher points on English tests, and this test factor motivated him to study grammar harder. Kana's autobiography, on the other hand, describes her stressful situation in which she had to study English harder to score higher points on the English test and, more importantly, to avoid being ranked lower in her high school English class. In this way, literacy autobiographies written by Japanese students provide qualitative evidence that, due to this purpose of language learning, Japanese students had to depend on input-based and accuracy-focused learning approaches.

The contribution of the current study to the field of TESOL and applied linguistics is to provide empirical support for Pavlenko's (2007) theoretical argument of the usage of autobiography in applied linguistics: An autobiography is used as data to explore L2 learners' personal life stories. This study shows that autobiographical data can be used for the investigation of a more focused topic than personal life stories; that is, to examine L2 learning histories of Japanese students. With the expansion of the research findings of Iida and Fujieda (2013): that a literacy autobiography is a tool to understand L2 learners' learning sources, tasks, environments, and purposes; this study also allows teachers and researchers to discover difficulties or problems L2 learners faced in their learning processes.

CONCLUSIONS

The current study has explored the value of writing literacy autobiographies in the Japanese EFL context. It provides some empirical support for theoretical assumptions of using literacy autobiography in the L2 classroom: (a) Writing literacy autobiographies is a meaningful task for students to increase their awareness of language learning processes, and (b) data on literacy autobiographies are useful for teachers and researchers to analyze and better understand students' L2 learning experiences.

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