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Second language poetry writing as reflective practice: A poetic inquiry into a pre-service teacher's experience of English language learning

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Abstract

This qualitative, case-study research investigated a Japanese pre-service teacher's English language learning experiences. Following Hanauer's (2010) methodological guidelines for second language (L2) poetry writing, the current study involved the analysis of five poems on the pre-service teacher's L2 learning experiences and the investigation of an analysis paper through which she analyzed each poem, found some common issues among the poems, and described her findings. The collection of her poems illustrated her history of L2 learning starting from the days when she studied English in junior high school to the moment when she was learning the language in an English speaking country. Also, the overall analysis of her written texts shows that poetry writing helped her to reflect on how she had studied English, discover problems of her L2 learning, and explore more effective ways to learn and teach English.

Introduction

Poetry writing is seen as an effective literacy practice in L2 contexts (Chamcharatsri, 2013; Hanauer, 2004, 2010, 2012; Iida, 2010, 2012, 2016, in press). This approach is supported with a theoretical framework for poetry writing as a form of *meaningful literacy learning* which Hanauer (2012) has developed to conceptualize L2 literacy instruction. This literacy learning is based on "a particular way of understanding and positioning the language learner and the language learning process" and involves the recognition of "the symbolic transformations in relation to self and world that learning a language entails" (Hanauer, 2012, p. 108). In other words, unlike traditional L2 pedagogy, this approach has great potential to make the language classroom dynamic and individual language learning more humanistic and meaningful (Hanauer, 2012; Iida, 2012). From an empirical viewpoint, however, it remains controversial how poetry writing helps L2 learners to reflect on their personal life experiences and to better understand themselves.

The aim of this article is to explore poetry writing as a form of reflective practice. This article begins by reviewing previous research on poetry writing and L2 writers. After clarifying the relationship between poetry writing and reflective practice from theoretical

viewpoints, it describes an empirical study on a Japanese pre-service teacher's experiences of English language learning. The main objectives of this study are to explore how the teacher understands and expresses her English language learning experiences in poetic form and to investigate the value of poetry writing as a form of reflective practice in teacher education programs. In so doing, this article intends to contribute to the development of the theory concerning poetry writing and L2 writers.

L2 poetry writing, reflective practice, and teacher professional development

Reflective practice is regarded as one of the key concepts for teacher professional development. This perspective is supported by many scholars in TESOL and applied linguistics. For instance, Farrell (2015) regards reflective practice as “central to a teacher’s development, because it helps teachers to analyse and evaluate what is happening in their classes” (p. xi). Richards and Farrell (2005) also think of reflection as “the process of critical examination of experiences, a process that can lead to a better understanding of one’s teaching practices and routines” (p. 7). In this light, reflective practice is a crucial process for teacher development and it helps language teachers to improve the quality of their teaching. As such, Farrell (2015) further argues the significance of reflection in terms of the relationship among individual teachers, their experiences, and teaching practice:

When we teach we are influenced by not only *who* we are but also by our *past experiences* because we have deeply ingrained values, thoughts, feelings, and needs which were formed since birth, all of which are inseparable from who we are and how we teach. Consequently, developing self-awareness through combination of contemplation and more conscious reflection on personal past experiences gives us a window into our philosophy of practice (p. 49, italics in original).

This perspective can be applied not only to teaching contexts but more broadly to our daily lives. In fact, Farrell’s (2015) concept of teacher reflection is very similar to theoretical and practical approaches for teaching poetry writing in the L2 classroom. For instance, Hanauer (2003) asserts that poetry “facilitate[s] the expression of individualized human experience in a new linguistic and cultural system and allow[s] the entrance into language classroom of diverse human experience and points of personal, cross-cultural contact (p. 85). Iida (2016) also regards poetry writing as involving “reflective and linguistic negotiation to construct meaning”, and it provides L2 writers with an opportunity “to reflect on their personal life experiences and negotiate how to construct and express their voices in the target

language” (p. 121). Furthermore, writing poetry is considered as a way to direct a process of critical self-reflection (Hanauer, 2010). In this way, poetry writing has the potential for writers to better understand themselves in the writing process (Chamcharatsri, 2013; Hanauer, 2004, 2010, 2012; Iida, 2012, 2016, *in press*).

As of now, the limited amount of empirical research on L2 poetry writing has been conducted in the field of applied linguistics, but one of the fundamental poetic inquiries was the investigation of ESL learners’ study abroad experiences conducted by Hanauer (2010). This study examined how the study abroad experience was characterized through poetry written by advanced ESL students who registered in ENGL 101: College Writing. Research findings showed that 78 poems written by these learners were categorized into five themes: self-positioning and the emotional response to language; emotional responses to academic classroom; contact with American students; negotiating American culture; and homesickness. Reflecting on the results, Hanauer (2010) concluded the study by arguing that poetry data set “attempts to reconstruct some of these moments and perhaps offers the opportunity of understanding these experiences from the perspective of the student who underwent this study abroad experience” (p. 129).

Iida (2016) also conducted another poetic inquiry in the EFL context. This research aimed to investigate the ability of Japanese L2 writers to write poetically and content of poetical descriptions concerning the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. This mixed-method research entailed both statistical analysis of 773 poems written by 78 Japanese EFL college students and in-depth analysis of thematic issues across the poems. The results of overall analyses of poetic data showed that the characterization of L2 poetry written by the Japanese students was short, personal, direct and descriptive and that poetry represented their direct responses and emotional insight into their earthquake experiences. Iida (2016) focused on L2 writers’ traumatic experiences in this study, but it provided evidence that Japanese L2 writers had the ability to write poems in the target language and that L2 poems can also be used as data to explore personal life experiences.

Previous studies show that poetry written by L2 learners can be used to explore personal life histories. However, poetic inquiry with L2 writers has been limited to personally significant and meaningful events such as study abroad or earthquake. Of particular interest in L2 poetry writing research is how Japanese EFL learners express their day-to-day life experiences. Reflecting on this concern, the current study addresses the following research question by focusing on a Japanese pre-service teacher who is seen as an advanced, highly

motivated EFL learner: In what way does a Japanese pre-service teacher understand and express her English language learning experiences in L2 poetry?

Methods

The current study employed a qualitative, case study research design. Following Hanauer's (2010) methodological guidelines for poetry writing as research, this study explores a pre-service teacher's experience of English language learning.

Participants

Initially, eleven English-major students registered in an English language teaching methodology course at a Japanese public university. This was a required course to obtain a teacher's license in the teacher education program. Ten students were college juniors and one is a senior who just came back from a one-year study abroad program in the United States. Nobody had participated in a teaching practicum, which they are required to visit and teach English either in junior high or senior high school during a couple of weeks.

The focal student in this study was a female college junior. She had studied English for twelve years under the Japanese educational system. She had been to Vancouver for a month to participate in a short-term study abroad program.

Data Collection

Data were collected in a five-day summer intensive program in 2013. It consisted of 15 lessons, 90 minutes per lesson, three lessons every day. The investigator designed this course by incorporating the following three components each day during the program: lecture on principles and techniques of language teaching; students' teaching demonstration; and poetry writing workshop.

A writing workshop was given in a way that each of the students was able to reflect on and understand their own English language learning experiences. This workshop was comprised of four stages. The first stage of this workshop was for the participant to understand the genre of poetry writing. Since she had very little experience writing poems both in Japanese and English, she learned the concept of poetry writing by reading poems written by other L2 learners. The purpose of this reading exercise was to understand how meaning was constructed and how the poet's voice was expressed in the text. The second stage was poetry writing. The participant was assigned to choose and reflect on five

unforgettable memories in her English language learning, free write each memory in Japanese, and create five poems in English. The third stage of this workshop involved the revision of poetry. While the participant joined a peer review session with her classmates, she had an opportunity to discuss one of her poems with the course instructor. This teacher-student conference was held as soon as she finished drafting her first poem. With feedback from the instructor and her classmates, she revised her five poems. The last stage of this writing workshop was to write a 500-word analysis paper in Japanese to explain her understanding of English language learning experiences. In this stage, the participant was assigned to analyze five poems, find common issues, and reflect on her emotional insights in participating in each language activity.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed with methodological guidelines of L2 poetry writing (Hanauer, 2010). The analyses entailed the examination of five poems written by the participant and the examination of the writer's subject position in L2 poetry. The poetic inquiry involved literary, linguistic, and content analyses of each poem while recreating the writer's subject position expressed in the actual descriptions of the poem. Each poem was carefully examined from the aspect of the writer's specific perspectives, emotional contents and understanding of the experience.

In regard to the analysis paper, it was first translated into English and then analyzed thematically. The purposes of this thematic analysis were to identify some issues of the participant's L2 learning experiences and to make connections between her emotional concerns expressed in L2 poetry and her understanding of each memory of English language learning. The analysis was based on six phases of thematic analysis designed by Braun and Clarke (2006): becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Results and Discussion

Nanako Mizutani (a pseudonym) wrote five poems regarding her English language learning experiences. The order of the poems was as follows: *Hard Test*, *English Songs*, *My English Teacher*, *English in High-School* and *Go Abroad*. She begins with the poem which expresses her emotion of taking such a difficult exam.

Hard Test

*Big nervous and stress
I want to escape very much
But I can't now*

*I try my best
Memorize, forget...
Memorize, forget...
Memorize, forget...
Forget, finally master English phrases*

Why does my teacher give me such a hard test?

*After several years...
I realize that
His strictness was the representation of his love
That hard experience
Makes me happy now*

This poem consists of two different scenes: the first three stanzas describe a moment when she studied English as preparation for a difficult test in the past; and the fourth stanza addresses her emotional insights concerning that tough experience. It seems that the poet had struggled with the test and expressed negative attitudes toward studying English. These emotional concerns are clearly represented in such expressions as “Big nervous and stress” “I want to escape very much” and “But I can’t now” in the first stanza. As can be seen in the first line of the second stanza, however, she tried to work hard to earn good scores on the test. This stanza explains how she studied and prepared for the test. She used the same phrase, “Memorize, forget...” three times indicating her trial and error in learning English phrases. It seems that she finally memorized them and was ready for the test, but as she wrote in the third stanza, she was not sure why her teacher gives such a difficult test. While she had negative feelings about learning English in junior high school, the fourth stanza expresses her gratitude to the teacher. Owing to his strict teaching approach and her difficult experience in the past, she seems to be able to feel happy about learning English now. This poem indicates that this tough experience in junior high school was indispensable for Nanako in order not only to improve her English skills and but also to develop herself.

English Songs

*Boring and sleepy English class
Teachers voice trail away
Heavy, Dull, Gloomy air*

*Sudden English song
My heart changes in a moment
My eyes open widely
Fresh, Light, Joyful air*

*Sing English songs every day
Carpenters, The Beatles, Aerosmith...*

*Even now,
Hum English songs, before I know it
Encounter of wonderful English songs
Still make me happy*

The second poem describes a memory of English songs in her English language learning experiences. The first stanza depicts a moment when she sat in regular English class. Such words as “Boring”, “sleepy”, “Heavy”, “Dull”, and “Gloomy” represent her negative attitude toward language learning in the classroom. On the other hand, as described in the second stanza, a sudden encounter with an English song changed her attitude all at once. This change can be seen in the following expressions, “My eyes open widely” and “Fresh, Light, Joyful air”. English songs seem to motivate her in learning English. Such expressions as “Sing English songs every day” in the third stanza and “Hum English songs before I know it” in the fourth stanza describe her positive attitude toward English learning. Overall, the encounter with English music including Carpenters, Beatles, and Aerosmith was a clue for her to become fond of English and it maintained and developed her motivation for her language learning.

My English Teacher
*English teacher at a junior high-school
Not kind, interesting, wonderful in particular
Although
Almost all of students like her*

*She always believes us
Respect for our autonomy
Make us do by ourselves*

*We also believe her
Decide English games' rule by ourselves
Discuss some topics in English with our group
Did independent study of English*

*Sometimes angry us, but it's an appropriate treatment
Such acts may be popular among us*

In the third poem, Nanako explores some characteristics of one of her junior high school English teachers. This poem addresses the importance of establishing a teacher-student relationship in English lessons. This is reflected in such expressions as “She always believe us” and “We also believe her”. The poet also realizes that what matters is not what this female teacher’s personality is, but how she teaches English or how she takes care of the students. It seems that the teacher’s actions including respecting “our autonomy”, making us “do by ourselves”, and doing “independent study of English” helps the students to promote their English language learning. Furthermore, the poet reflects on why she liked the teacher. As described in the poem, while the teacher always puts a special emphasis on the students’ autonomy, she sometimes disciplines them with an appropriate manner. The poet thinks that the teacher’s approach to her students seems to be effective and helps to develop a good relationship between the teacher and students.

English in High-School

Become a high school student

Big expectation and tension

Hope to know something new and interest

What will we study in our English classes from now??

Contrary to my wishes,

There is nothing without “Exam English”

Disappointed, Boring, Sad

Is it true to improve my English skills?

Why do I study English?

Lose sight...

Darker and darker

While the first three poems involved English language learning in junior high school, the fourth one, *English in High-School* describes the poet’s emotional concerns for high school English. In the first stanza, the poet expresses her positive emotions for English language learning in high school. These emotions are represented in the word choice including “expectation”, “Hope”, “new”, and “interest”. The last sentence, “What will we study in our English classes from now??” also represents new challenges in English courses in high school. In contrast, the second stanza expresses her disappointment at the lessons in high school. This negative emotion is powerfully expressed in the third line, “Disappointed, Boring, Sad”. The third stanza also expresses her puzzlement in learning English. It seems that she loses her motivation and does not know why she learns the language. Actually, she

asks herself, “Is it true to improve my English skills?” and “Why do I study English?”. Such phrases as “Lose sight...” and “Darker and darker” indicate that she is at a loss what to do and this learning environment makes it quite difficult to motivate her to study English.

Go abroad

Last summer

My first studying abroad in Vancouver

Full of anxiety, tension, puzzlement

My speaking skill of English is poor

Try to communicate with people all over the world

India, Thai, Korea, Mexico, Brazil ...

Not good at speaking English too

But we can do it

Surprisingly, but so delightful, glittering, interesting

Different mother languages

But we understand each other

By speaking only one language “English”

It’s a very wonderful thing, isn’t it?

The last poem describes her short-term study abroad experience in Vancouver. The first stanza depicts her emotional insight regarding her first time experience to study in a foreign country. As clearly described in the last line, she is “full of anxiety, tension, [and] puzzlement”. In the second stanza, she addresses her trial in communicating with others in the target language. It seems that she discovered that, although her English speaking skills are poor, she could communicate with her classmates or friends from India, Thailand, Korea, Mexico, and Brazil. This indicates that this successful experience empowers her and helps to develop her confidence in using English. So, that is why she feels “so delightful, glittering, [and] interesting.” Reflecting on this learning experience, she wrote her discovery in the last stanza. She seems to realize that, though we have different mother tongues, we are able to communicate and understand each other by using “only one language, ‘English’”. The use of a tag question, “It’s a very wonderful thing, isn’t it?” in the last line is seen as the representation of her emotion, which she would probably like someone to agree with her thought or be eager to share her successful experience with others.

The collection of five poems put in chronological order shows Nanako’s history of L2 learning starting from the days when she studied English in junior high school in Japan to the moment when she learned it in Vancouver. Each memory which is defined as significant by this Japanese L2 writer illustrates some key issues in her English language learning. The first

issue is English teachers. As can be seen in the first and third poems, Nanako describes memories of learning English with her teachers. From these poems, we can understand that they have positive effects on her and her English language learning and more importantly, she really appreciates them. In her analysis paper, she explains the importance of building a teacher-student relationship:

As I described in Poem #3, my 9th-grade English teacher placed an emphasis on student autonomy and avoided controlling us too much. For that reason, there was a strong feeling of trust between the teacher and the students. I believe, therefore, in order to foster students who think and act by themselves, it is important for teachers to offer communicative language lessons [emphasis added] rather than textbook-based instruction in a teacher-centered approach, one that stresses rote memorization and grammatical explanations.

The second issue of her L2 learning is motivation. In the second poem, she clearly describes how English songs changed her attitude toward English. Although she felt bored in regular English class, music was a trigger for her to become fond of and get interested in studying English.

In junior high school, I always memorized sentences and vocabulary from the textbooks, and I worked solely on reading comprehension of the textbook passages. From time to time, we had the chance to listen to an English song or learn about peoples' lives in English-speaking countries. I was thrilled to learn that there is a unique and interesting world beyond Japan [emphasis added]. In this respect, I think that it is necessary for teachers to develop students' motivation to study English harder while they provide them with a variety of topics, for example, music, customs, geography, to make them eager to learn more [emphasis added].

While English songs promoted her to learn the language, exams demotivated her to work hard. For instance, the first poem describes her uncertainty why she needed to study for a difficult test. In addition, the fourth poem addresses her struggle or frustration under the situation where she had to study for college entrance exams in high school English lessons. This issue is also clearly described in her analysis paper:

As I wrote in Poem #4, all my classes were taught in the style of The Grammar-Translation Method, where accuracy in both reading and writing classes was for university entrance exams. As a result, I lost sight of the purpose of learning English and I didn't know if the English that I was learning was practical or not [emphasis added]. That is why a teacher must inform students how and when the target English is used.

A learning environment is also another factor to affect Nanako's L2 learning. As seen in the fifth poem, she discovered the nature and significance of L2 learning in Vancouver. What she experienced abroad was completely different from how she studied English in Japanese secondary school. In Vancouver, she realized and recognized that English was a medium for communication by using the language practically with other L2 learners. She clearly mentions this point in the analysis paper while arguing what approach can possibly be effective to develop communicative English skills in the Japanese L2 classroom:

Students must understand that *English is not just a subject but a language, a means of communication among people* [emphasis added]. ... In my opinion, teachers should use Content-based Instruction or Task-based Language Teaching approaches that focus on content and tasks related to daily life. In so doing, *language learning should not be just for an entrance examination, but rather students should be able to learn English that they can use in the world beyond the classroom* [emphasis added].

Overall, the collection of poetry describes significant moments regarding Nanako's English language learning. Each poem expresses her direct and emotional concerns for each language activity she experienced. The current study also shows Nanako's patterns of voice construction in L2 poetry writing. One pattern is the usage of emotional words. She was inclined to use such emotional words as *boring, anxiety, tension, sad, or happy* directly to express her emotions. Instead of using indirect expressions (e.g., metaphors), she seemed to attempt to communicate her voice in a way that she describes and recreates each memory in the text. This finding provides empirical support of Iida (2012, 2016) that poetry produced by Japanese L2 writers is direct and descriptive. For Japanese L2 writers, the use of metaphors may be challenging because it requires a high level of language proficiency and various repertoires to express their emotions in the target language. Another feature is, as seen in the first and second poem, how Nanako organizes poems. All her poems consisted of three to four stanzas and she made connections between the past event and her current situation in the text. In the first poem, for instance, while Nanako described how she studied and prepared for the vocabulary test in the first three stanzas, she reflected on and addressed her current concerns for English language learning in the last stanza. This point is also reflected in the usage of such phrases as "after several years", or "now". From this viewpoint, poetry writing allowed Nanako not only to revisit and recreate each of her significant memories of L2 learning but to reflect on her personal experiences. In other words, writing poetry was both literacy and reflective practice for the L2 writer and provided her with an opportunity to

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