

Voicing in Second Language Poetry Writing

Implications to English as Liberal Arts Education in the Japanese University Context

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1. Introduction

Voiceless voice

I can write
grammatically correct sentences.
I have gotten all As
in graduate courses at an American university.

But...

I feel NO VOICE in my papers.
I feel UNATTACHED to my writing

(Iida, in press)

This poem addresses several problems of my second language (L2) writing when I attended graduate school in the United States. At that time, I had the ability to complete my term papers, but I felt unattached to my writing. I even felt that my papers were written by somebody else. Why did I face such a problem? Is it because I was simply a less-experienced writer or because I lacked L2 rhetorical, linguistic, or genre knowledge? The issues related to the poem provide us with opportunities to reflect on what it means to *learn to write* in English and consider the notion of *voice* in L2 writing.

In this article, I discuss the issue of voice in L2 writing and the value of writing poetry in the L2 classroom. Reflecting on the notion of *meaningful literacy* (Hanauer, 2012), I suggest the use of poetry writing in English as liberal arts education at the tertiary level.

2. Poetry Writing Through Meaningful Literacy Practice

The problems of L2 writing I posed above are not only personal but also cultural. The fact is that many Japanese L2 learners have faced similar problems (Iida, 2010). As criticized by applied linguists, traditional L2 pedagogy has lost sight of “the flesh-and-blood individuals who are doing the learning” (Kramsch, 2006, p. 98). With that pedagogy, students are able to gain L2 linguistic knowledge through memorization, drill exercises, or translation. In such a context, however, an important concept, *voice* has been left behind in language learning. Voice is seen as a key concept to learn to write in the target language (Brown & Lee, 2015; Iida, 2010, 2016a, 2016b, in press). It is defined as “the articulation of [writers’] personal needs, interests, and ideas—in a social context that presumes an *audience*—the teachers,

classmates, and even the community at large” (Iida, 2010, p. 28). In short, voice is the writer’s self-representation of identity in writing.

We already know that voice is an important concept to teach in L2 writing instruction, but how can we teach the concept and encourage students to incorporate it into the text? I believe that poetry writing as a form of meaningful literacy best fits into L2 literacy practice. A meaningful literacy framework has been designed to “position the individual learner and her/his personal experience, history and social contextualization at the center of learning experience (Hanauer, 2012, p. 104), and express and communicate his/her emotional responses to personal life experiences in written forms. Previous studies support a theoretical assumption that the poetry writing is one simple and feasible approach to manifest meaningful literacy instruction (Iida, 2016a, 2016b).

Following meaningful literacy instruction, Nanako Mizutani (a pseudonym) who is a Japanese pre-service teacher of English at a public university wrote the following poem.

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

(Iida, 2016, p. 88)

This poem describes the first English lesson the poet took in high school. When I first read this poem, I feel the poet’s different emotions and perceptions towards her high school English class. In this poem, the emotional gap between before she took English lesson and after she actually took part in the class was clearly articulated with the phrase, *Contrary to*: while her positive emotion was clearly presented in the first two stanzas with such words as *expectation, hope, new, interest, and wishes*, her negative feeling was expressed in both the second and third stanzas with phrases including *nothing, disappointed, boring, sad, lose sight, and darker and darker*. This poem was written in response to a classroom requirement, but this goes beyond a simple linguistic practice in the traditional classroom. Through the authentic use of language, the poet honestly reflected on her English lesson in high school, considered what was learnt, negotiated her emotional responses to “Exam English”, and expressed her English language learning experience in L2

poetry writing. This memory must be one of her significant moments in English language learning and she could probably benefit from this personal experience in her role as a future English teacher.

3. Conclusions and Suggestions

In this article, I have discussed the importance of teaching voice in the L2 classroom. As reported in other studies (Chamcharatsri, 2013; Hanauer, 2012; Iida, 2016a, 2016b, in press), poetry writing is an uncommon task to L2 learners, but still a feasible literacy activity. Reflecting on college English as liberal arts, it may be true that teaching English for standardized proficiency tests including the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) is important, but how can Japanese college students maintain and develop their motivation to study English except for an increase of test scores? In most cases, L2 learners can be motivated to learn a new language when they learn to use the language or felt that their English makes sense to other (native) speakers of the language. In other words, they are motivated to learn through the practical use of the target language.

In teaching English as part of a liberal arts curriculum, we must address this issue and design lessons. As discussed in this article, voice is a crucial concept for written communication and literacy development. Hence, I believe that teachers need to teach the concept and train students to express their own voice in the text. I also believe that college students should develop linguistic knowledge, reflective skills, and the ability of self-expression in English as liberal arts education in order to accurately express and communicate “who they are” in the target language. Poetry writing has great potential for students to develop these knowledge and skills through the reflection on their real-life experiences. To make this poetry writing pedagogy successful in the L2 classroom, teachers should not overemphasize L2 learners’ incorrect usage of grammar and vocabulary in the teaching of poetry writing; rather they should respect their linguistic and literary choices and confirm and advise them whether their voice is clearly and accurately expressed in the text.

4. References

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