The Perceptions of L2 Learners about Writing Practices
Representing Authenticity, Communication, and Self-orientation

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to look into what perceptions college learners had about different activities in the writing process. The activities featured authenticity, communication, and self-orientation. Thus, this study attempted to implement the genuine functions of writing. For this study, 23 college students were served as the participants. With both the low and the intermediate level of English proficiency, they took an introductory writing course. For data collection, the researcher administered surveys and conducted interviews. Surveys were conducted five times, and interviews were carried out once with a focus group. In the surveys, the participants were asked to elaborate on their experience on communication and authentic reading materials. In the interviews conducted in a semi-structured form, they spelled out their story untold in the surveys. The findings showed that the participants engaged in reading, broadened their perspectives on the topics discussed, and enjoyed student-oriented activities.

Keywords: L2 learners, writing process, authentic materials, communication, self-orientation

1. Introduction

Writing instructors organize their instruction from the standpoints of process, largely involving pre-writing, writing, and post-writing. Prior to the writing and post-writing phase where learners are typically asked to produce multiple drafts, revise, and edit them, the pre-writing phase is the stage of preparing for writing, as a writer explores a topic, rhetorical structures or ideas for a writing task. It can involve a creative and active process by addressing a versatile mix of activities and contents with which student writers understand the nature of writing, with the process making writing activities communicative, critical, authentic and rich in readings.

For instance, while conducting his study, Yu attempted to make a connection between
reading and writing in the pre-writing stage and explored the perceptions and practices of the reading and writing connection.[2][3][4] Before constructing a draft, he required students to read two articles whose topics were relevant to a writing task. In doing so, he helped them to familiarize the topic and structure of the writing task, facilitating their possibly arduous work. The findings of the study disclosed that, although most of the students were beginners in L2 writing, they became aware of the critical relation between reading and writing by mining words, expressions, sentences, and organization for their own writing.

This study also included critical readings for writing in the similar ways described above. However, this study uncovered dynamics and diversity found in the writing class in the way that it explored L2 student writers’ perception about the writing course whose pre-writing process features communication, self-orientation, and authenticity. The guided questions for this study were: 1) How did the participants feel about the process of selecting and reading articles for writing tasks? 2) How did they perceive leaving their thoughts on the articles they read? and 3) which learning materials did they prefer, authentic online materials or a conventional writing textbook?

2. Research Method

2.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 23 college students who took an English writing course. The course was initially designed for sophomores in English Department; however, many students from other majors - photography, international commerce, food science & industry, robot engineering, psychotherapy, etc. - were also enrolled in the course. Most of them were not adept at writing in English, so what they would like to achieve through the writing course were not advanced goals. According to the pre-survey administered at the beginning of the course, the students wanted to improve their general English ability, use vocabulary words correctly, write grammatically correct sentences, and finally make the logical presentation of thoughts with enough ideas. The present writing course was the follow-up writing course, so the students had adequate understanding of how to deliver their thoughts in the form of paragraph.
2.2 Instructional Context for the Writing Course

The writing course for this study was designed to help students to engage in writing tasks with authentic and student-oriented topics. The course, which lasted 15 weeks, consisted of four writing tasks whose process represented reading an article, discussing it in groups, completing a first draft, receiving feedback, revising/editing the first draft, and posting a revised draft on the online learning site of the course. The topics of the writing were healthy living, travel, sleep and GPS for the soul.[5]

Most of the students had already took one writing course in which students were assigned tasks requiring them to read articles from the textbook and complete a paragraph form of writing, prior to the present English writing course. In that sense, it is safe to say that they were adequately aware of the general nature of the present writing course, such as the writing process and the requirements of the final product. However, the writing course for the present study was more dynamic and authentic than the preceding writing course.

The writing course was made to help students to engage in the writing process, providing for authentic reading-to-write sources and freedom to select an article to read and a topic to write and requiring them to be more responsible for the writing process.[6] Instead of using a published book for the class, the researcher used articles from the Huffingtonpost online and decided the sections of reading after collecting the students’ opinions.[7] The sections they read to write included healthy living, travel, sleep, and GPS for the soul. Regarding the process of one writing task, the researcher read one article from the Huffingtonpost with the students and showed one possible writing product. The writing product was composed of three paragraphs, one of which was supposed to contain a summary, a text analysis, and an opinion, respectively, about the articles the students read. The three paragraphs were separate, which means that they did not have to be logically connected. After the teacher’s demonstration, a student explained his or her own article selected to the other students in a group of four and the other students put down a one-sentence summary. After completing this process, they were supposed to post one reply online to the article that they read for their own writing task. The purpose of this posting activity was to encourage them to engage in reading and recognize the sense of communication through writing. In the wake of this activity, the students came up with a rough draft of writing and received feedback from the instructor and sometimes peers. In doing so in the writing process of each writing task, the instructor put efforts to make the writing course more dynamic, authentic, and communicative. The same process of writing recurred throughout the semester.
2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The three types of data sets were collected for this study. The first one was a pre-survey in which the instructor intended to recognize the students’ current self-perceived writing ability, goals and practices about this class. The second one consisted the four surveys that the students filled out as a form of reflection journal, which required them to put down their thoughts briefly responding to eight questions. The questions directly relevant to the present study were the following four questions: 1) Was the topic intriguing enough to read and write about? 2) What was the title of the article you read and why did you select that article? 3) What did you feel about the activity to make a comment to the article? and 4) Which do you like better, authentic online materials or a conventional textbook, for a writing textbook? The last one stemmed from the interviews with a focus group to deepen the understanding of the survey responses along with their in-depth perceptions about the writing course. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way.[8]

The data were analyzed by utilizing thematic analysis widely used in qualitative data.[9][10] The researcher first read survey responses and interview transcripts several times, as taking note of comments associated with the research questions. The researcher, then, read the survey responses and the interview transcripts carefully to find out the elaborate and prominent comments that adequately corresponded to the research questions. Finally, the researcher selected excerpts from the data to demonstrate the study findings. The names presented right after the excerpts are all pseudonyms.

3. Findings

3.1 Perceptions about Participants-selecting and Authentic Topics to Read for Writing

This section is to respond to the first research question: How did the participants feel about the process of selecting and reading articles for writing tasks? Although it was indicated that preferences to each writing topic were varying, the instructional process motivated them to be more attached to what they were required to read. When asked to elaborate on a fondness for the writing topics and the selecting process of the topics, most of them illustrated that the topics they read were in line with the interests or concerns that they normally had on a daily basis. Also, they created opportunities to review a good deal of useful information in the process of selecting their own article, with them reading more for pleasure not just for the
It was found that many students showed their interests in reading self-selected articles, and it was observed that this approach aided them in taking part in reading actively. Relating to them, some participants’ voices are in the following:

I like the topic. I think it is because the article that you gave us to read and the one I chose for writing gave many good and interesting pieces of information. I chose ‘7 Olympian-approved Ways to Eat Healthier.’ The reason I chose this article is because nowadays it’s one of the most popular fields. And we do eat everyday, so I thought that this article might give some good and informative clues to eat properly and healthy. (Jeehoon)

I think, ‘Healthy Living’ is interesting for me because I am getting older. I am interested in health. Although the first project was finished, I will check this section to read more. I chose ‘FDA’ bans antibacterial chemicals from consumer soaps.’ I chose this article because when I read this article, I really agreed with it. For instance, Oxy made the humidifier disinfections and 1848 people have died in Korea. In addition, I have heard about the antibacterial products, such as shampoo, body wash, are very harmful. So I was interested in this article. (Hyejee)

Healthy Living has interesting details like stress, exercise, diet, insomnia and so on. It was very interesting, especially part about stress. I read various articles in the stress part. My article was ‘who’s really happier: young people or older people.’ I really hated that I’m aging. I wanted to stop time if I could. I thought young people are happier, of course, so I clicked this article and it changed my thoughts. (Youngseon)

I like the idea that our freedom to select an article was assured. I could take part in the class in a proactive way. I feel like it required me to think more and critically, encouraging me to experience self-oriented writing. (Hansoo)

### 3.2 Perceptions about Posting a Comment

This section is to respond to the second research question: How did they perceive leaving their thoughts on the articles they read? The participants were required to read one online article for each writing task and post at least one comment on the reply section at the bottom of the article. The purpose of this activity was to promote the notion that writing is for
communication. The participants were asked to put down how they perceived the process of leaving their thoughts. The comment writing that most of the participants had never done, even in Korean, allowed them to encounter new experience and do meaningful activities, with them gaining confidence, engaging in their reading to writing, learning English writing, and enlarging their perspectives. Some of the reflective comments that they made were in the following:

It was a very interesting thing. Many people can see my opinion, and I can see their opinions, too. This is online communication, so I think it is a good idea to do it. (Minjee)

I have never written a comment, so it’s a fresh experience to me. By writing a comment, I could focus on the article more deeply. (Sunjoo)

I was embarrassed. I had never written a comment in Korean, so writing a comment in English looked like impossible. But it wasn’t. It was interesting, because, as writing comments, I could communicate with foreigners. And I was a little nervous, but I became emotionally confident. (Taeseong)

I was scared that foreigners who use English with their native language can see my comments. My comments have grammar mistakes and only easy words, but I should do this. I did and the first time was difficult. Next time, it will be fun. I facebook, so foreigners ask me to be friends. (Jinseon)

3.3 Preference of Authentic Reading Materials to Write to a Conventional Textbook

This section is to respond to the third research question: Which did learning materials did they prefer, authentic online materials or a conventional writing textbooks? The writing course featured authentic writing topics that were obtained from authentic reading materials online after the participants browsed the web site of the Huffingtonpost. In the preceeding semester, however, they participated in the L2 writing class with a conventional text. They were asked of which they would prefer, online writing materials or a conventional textbook. Most of the participants expressed their favor about a writing course with authentic reading materials over the one based on a conventional textbook. The reasons for that were that they were free to choose to read an article to write, received chances to listen to varying opinions from peers.
since they read different articles, and became more active in learning. One student in an interview, however, expressed the pros and cons in both materials. Some of the reflective views were in the following:

I think this kind of class with the Internet news is better. I can choose news with my interest. I can get helpful ideas with this class and communicate with other people with comments. Also, I can share a lot of information with classmates, which is awesome. Books are also good, but the Internet news is more fun and helpful to me, I think. (Jinseon)

The writing tasks in the last semester were easy to conduct since readings to write were predictable since we used a textbook, which was suitable to English Writing I. However, this course is advantageous over the previous one since we needed to be more active and self-oriented. Also, since we read a different article, I could listen to many different stories. I was fun. (Yeonjoo)

I like both of them. Each of them has advantages and disadvantages. With a textbook, we don’t need to print out, and it is also colorful. A textbook does not have the latest information. Articles are free. Selecting a topic to read is my choice. It is advantageous. But I feel so tired to choose sometimes. (Hansoo)

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study mostly showed that the students were satisfied with the writing practices in the course featuring authenticity, communication, and self-orientation. As for the perceptions about participant-selecting and authentic topics, many students showed their interests in reading self-selected articles which aided them in taking part in reading actively. Regarding perceptions about posting comments, they stated that it allowed them to have new and meaningful experience, with them gaining confidence, engaging in their reading to writing, and broadening their perspectives. In using authentic reading materials over a conventional textbook, most of the participants expressed their favor about authentic reading materials since they were free to choose to read an article to write, received chances to listen to varying opinions from peers since they read different articles, and finally became more active in learning.

In short, although the researcher needs to conduct more studies to confirm his findings from this particular study, it is assumed that writing instructors should make continuous efforts to provide students with a writing course featuring authenticity, communication, and
self-orientation. Students then are highly likely to understand the genuine purpose of writing from the perspective of communication and become more responsible learners.

References


