

L1 and L2 writing: The learning journal for pedagogy

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This study examines the usefulness of the learning journal as a pedagogical tool. Adding to previous studies that highlight the advantages in using the learning journal, the current study focuses on its role in the academic writing classroom. The journal was assigned in an undergraduate academic writing class in Seoul, South Korea as a semester-long assignment. Students wrote in either their L1 or L2 to record what they studied and made subjective contemplations regarding the class or their learning. Through the learning journal, the study looks into students' reflections as learners, with such contemplations reflected in either their L1 or L2 language(s).

Qualitative data from the journals show that the learning journal, whether written in the L1 or L2, enables the learner to reflect on their own writing, through writing. Data show that the writing in a learning journal served several purposes for learners, including: a role in helping students to identify the close relationship between reading and writing, enabling student documentation of their own learning process and outcomes, and identifying their own weaknesses and improvements.

Key words: L1 writing; L2 writing; learning journal; undergraduate; academic writing; South Korea

Background

Writing is a way of connecting individuals with each other in ways that carry particular special meanings, and the process of writing is a rich collection of elements (Hyland, 2003). Specifically, Hyland (2003) points out the merits of genre-based writing, which unlike process approaches to writing, offers students “explicit and systematic explanations of the ways language functions in social contexts” (Hyland, 2003, p. 18). Genre-based writing is writing based on the assumption that the features of a similar group of texts depend on the social context of their creation and use (Hyland, 2003). It is based on the idea that members of a community are usually able to recognize similarities in texts they use on a frequent basis, and are able to draw on repeated experiences with such texts to read, understand and perhaps write such texts (Hyland, 2007). As such, genre-writing enables L2 users to use language to interpret communicative situations, combining language together with content and context.

Kern and Schultz (2005) view L2 literacy, which is defined as the “reciprocal relationships among readers, writers, texts, culture and language learning” (Kern & Schultz, 2005, p. 382), as being a combination of social, cognitive and linguistic practices which differ according to situational and cultural contexts. Kern (2008) emphasizes the point that texts enable learners the opportunities to position themselves in relation to viewpoints and cultures, and to “make the connection between grammar, discourse, and meaning, between language and content, between language and culture, and between another culture and their own” (Kern, 2008, p. 380).

Canagarajah (2011) looks at translanguaging in writing, which can bring discourse and rhetorical issues into focus (p. 402). Writing is different to speaking which is more spontaneous, and unlike the relatively spontaneous speech act, the monitored and somewhat detached activity of writing involves strategic options and choices. Students have to develop a critical awareness of the choices that are rhetorically more effective. Canagarajah (2014) points out that language choice can index the author's reshaping of identity, subjectivity, and role, providing additional layers to voice at the microtextual level (p. 4). In his study, Canagarajah presents a model featuring identity, role, subjectivity and awareness with the aim of exploring how these "find amalgamation in the textual voices of multilingual students" (p. 2). "Identity" relates to features such as language, ethnic, and national affiliations that are part of one's history. Canagarajah points out that although these should not be treated as monolithic or essentialized, one should remain open to the possibility that "students might desire to represent their heritage with pride or draw from it positively for fashioning their voices" (p. 3). "Role" is a social category which refers to varying subject positions people are provided in institutions such as schools, workplaces, professional communities and the family. According to Canagarajah, the roles one plays come with expectations about the voice one should adopt in communicative interactions. "Subjectivity" is an "ideological construct" which indexes the discourses that shape one's voice as they find expression through genre conventions, communicative norms, and value systems (Canagarajah, 2014, pp. 2-3).

The learning journal has been used by many scholars and practitioners, and studies have highlighted its usefulness in the classroom (Fox, 2000; Lee & Gyogi, 2016; Moon, 1999, 2004; Orem, 2001; Pearson-Evans, 2006; Shih, 2011; Tuan, 2010). A learning journal, sometimes called a learner diary, learning diary or log, is "an accumulation of material that is mainly based on the writer's processes of reflection" (Moon, 1999, p. 4). The reflective learning journal has been used in various practice- and/or work-based areas, including professional education such as nursing and teacher training (Shih, 2011). It has also been used by various scholars and practitioners in the field of translation studies (Adab, 2000; Fox, 2000; Lee, 2015; Martinez Melis & Hurtado Albir, 2001) and language pedagogy (Orem, 2001; Pearson-Evans, 2006; Tuan, 2010). According to Li (1998), the journal can promote students' critical and reflective thinking. It has also been found that the reflective learning journal can draw students' attention to the process of translation (Li, 1998). Lee (2015) conducted a study of postgraduate students of translation and interpreting studies in South Korea and found that a learning journal enabled them to analyse and review their own work and performance, recognize change and development and also set future goals.

Considering the usefulness of the learning journal and the nature of writing, the current study draws on data from a learning journal kept over the duration of the course to look at the role of the learning journal in a writing classroom. Through the writing of a learning journal in either their L1 or L2, students' are reflecting on their learning and L2 writing.

The current study aims to answer the following question: What role can the learning journal play in the undergraduate writing classroom?

Methodology

Method of Study

The data presented in the current study are from an undergraduate writing class at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul, South Korea. The course was university English academic writing for pre-elementary level students. The learning journal was an assignment kept over the 16 weeks of the semester. It was called a “study log” as it also contained a summary of learned content, for ease and convenience of reviewing of that content. The students were given the choice to either add entries on a weekly basis or write accumulated entries when it came to submission time. The journal was submitted five times throughout the period of the course (one semester).

The course content consisted of drafting, editing and reviewing of work to produce final drafts of 3 different essay types: descriptive, narrative and opinion essays. The first few weeks of the semester looked at the transition from paragraph to short essay, and then 3 weeks were spent on each essay type. Within each set of three weeks, the first week typically involved learning the organization of the essay type, and relevant vocabulary or grammar. Students would then create a first draft. The second week involved peer review and editing of the first drafts and the final week involved self-editing exercises for a final draft of the essay.

Participants

The class was for those in Year 2 and above, and the course was for mixed double major students who majored in English Interpreting and Translation along with another major. All 27 students in the class submitted the study log. Four of the students have been selected as participants in the study reported here (they are profiled in Table 1). The researcher and author of the current paper was the lecturer for the class.

To preserve participants’ confidentiality their identities have been anonymised. In order to preserve the authentic voices of the students, excerpts have not been altered from their original form except when clarification is deemed necessary to aid the reader. In such instances, clarifications are shown in brackets. Excerpts which were originally written in Korean and have been translated by the author are indicated with square brackets.

Table 1. Student profiles

	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4
Major	Italian & EIT	Business Administration & EIT	Economics & EIT	English-American Literature and Culture & EIT
Year of study	2	4	4	2
First language	Korean	Korean	Korean	Korean
Other languages learned	English, Chinese and Italian	English	English Chinese	English

Data Collection

The journal was submitted 5 times over the semester, and each time students were given specific instructions regarding the weeks they were to summarise and write about. The instructions for the study log can be seen in Figure 1. Although these instructions were provided to the students, and students were to summarise learned content in the *Summary of What You Learned* section students were free to write on whichever other aspects they wished to write about in the *Additional Remarks* section.

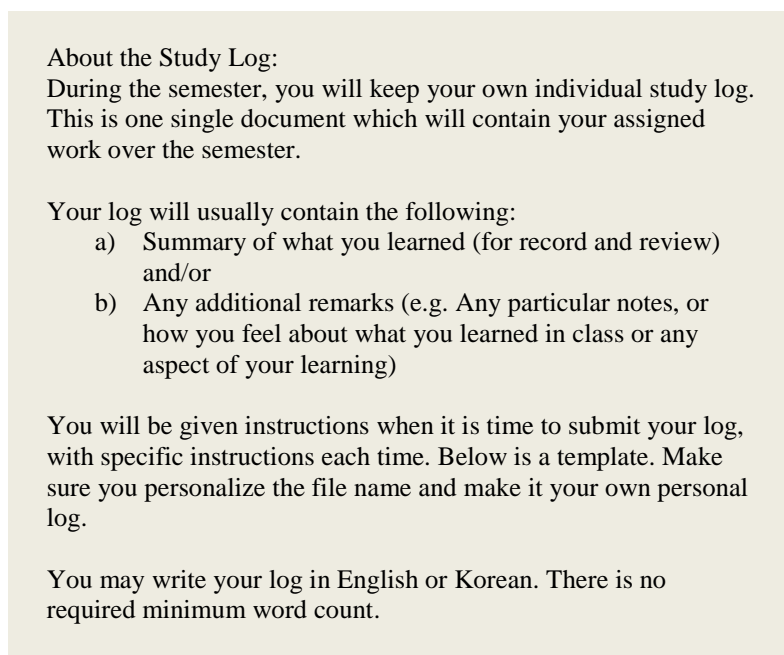


Figure 1. The study log instructions

Data Analysis

Data was analysed with NVivo software with thematic analysis. For the current study, parts of the data which relate to students' reflections of their own writing were coded. As the whole data set was relatively large, excerpts have been randomly selected for presentation and discussion in the current study.

Findings and Discussion

The main common theme identified from the data is participants' reflection on their own writing.

Student 1: Reflections of writing

Student 1 reflected on her learning early in the course and then reflected again later noticing changes in herself.

Student 1: Week no. 5-7

For weeks 5-7, we learned how to write effective descriptive essays. The key idea of good descriptive writing is an image-building. Before we write a descriptive essay, we need to think of an image, and use words to build a image for the reader. In this

way, readers are able to imagine and feel if they are present in the scene. In other words, a writer should use details to tell how a subject looks, sounds, smells, tastes, or feels by adding enough nouns, adjectives, adverbs and similes, so that the readers can actually feel like responding to what he or she is reading. Like other essays, a descriptive essay also needs organization. In introduction, a hook, background information, and the thesis statement should be included. In body paragraphs, this is the part that differentiates a descriptive essay and others. There should be a lot of details such as adjectives, adverbs, prepositional phrases, and similes to make the image more vivid. Then as usually, the conclusion gives the writer's final opinion about the item described.

I could remind myself of using similes when I want to add details. I only could think of adding adjectives and adverbs before I took this class, and it was a challenging task since I only knew limited adverbials. However, with using similes, I could broaden my expression much more widely.

Student 1's entry for Weeks 5-7 of the course shows how she reflected on her learning. The student revisited what was learned in class, and added comments relating to her own understanding or reaction to the learned content.

Student 1: Week 13-15

This is my second English writing class in the HUFs. The first one was about paragraphs, and now I learned how to write an essay. At first, I just wrote things. I did not do any brainstorm, outline, or edit. My first writing was my final draft. However, I could change through these writing class. Not only could I learn how to write different kinds of essay, but also could I make a great writing habit. Of course, I still need to work on organization, grammar, and vocabulary, but now I have confidence that I could start writing.

In the entry for Weeks 13-15, Student 1 looked back on the semester and commented on changes in her own learning. The student commented on the change in attitude towards the process of writing, and a new habit which was formed during the semester.

Student 2: Reflections of writing

Early on in the semester, Student 2 commented on his subjective feelings about learned content covered in class:

Student 2: Week 4

What I learned throughout the class was pretty exciting. I thought it is the first sentence that always contains key ideas about the whole writing. However, what I have done as a class exercise was to fill in the blanks with the appropriate thesis statement, the most important component in the introduction part, and it is located at the very last part of the introductory paragraph. First sentences, instead, were rather a hook or an opening sentence.

From the previous additional remarks I have made, I realized there are close relationship between reading and writing. As I learn about writing, there is no doubt that I can practice writing and upgrade my skills of writing. But on the other side, as a writer, I found it really hard to ignore (or separate) my readers since they are the one who actually read my writing. If my essay is a product, readers are potential consumers. This why writing and reading is inseparable.

An interesting point is the fact that Student 2, through reading his own entries, arrived at a realization regarding the relationship between writing and reading. The class content prompted him to consider the target reader and the aims of his writing. Writing about this in his learning journal then encouraged him to make this realization.

The next excerpt from Student 2's journal shows how he documented his learned content:

Student 2: Week 6

Summary

1. What is a descriptive essay?

It uses words and phrases to build images that appeal to the five senses (sight, sound, taste, smell, and feeling)

2. Freewriting

It is contained in the writing project document. It was useful to write everything I had in my mind. I was not afraid of making mistakes, but some of the ideas and sentences I wrote inspired me to come up with more refined sentences later on.

3. Brainstorming using a spider diagram

Spider diagram, or word web is a great tool to express writer's idea before starting to write. Especially, it organizes ideas and related vocabularies about the subject matter.

4. Identifying audience and purpose

Before I start writing for my first draft, defining my target reader as well as the purpose of writing was a big help. I could keep this in my mind throughout the whole writing so that I could stay within the actual boundary of my topic.

5. Brainstorming vocabulary

Thinking of words and expressions as much as I can has helped me a lot, too. Whenever I got stuck with my first draft, I looked up at the brainstorming section for appropriate words. Because it is about descriptive essay, this part played a pivotal role of 'word pool' for me in finding suitable adjectives for the writing.

- a) Upon reading descriptive essays in the textbook, I felt that this kind of essay is easy to read but very hard to write. It is not about some ideas or concepts that take time to understand. However, it is just telling us simple details about what a guava is and surrounding personal backgrounds with it. So what a reader has to do is to freely picture what is explained according to the adjectives and adverbs the writer has used. But when it comes to writing good descriptive essays, maybe I will run out of vocabulary to vividly depict what I intend to.
- b) For the free writing, I only had 10 minutes so there could be a lot of mistakes. But it is just a free writing. I could get a glimpse of what it is like to write my own essay. It is not easy as I have thought – even though it is simply about writing why I like coffee. But shortly after the exercises in page 32 and 33, I knew what I had to write. Brainstorming, identifying audience and purpose, and thinking of what vocabularies to use are very important steps to go through before starting to write descriptive essays.

The journal enabled the student to record what he learned. On another level, it enabled him to reflect on this learning while writing and then again later, when he re-read the entry. For the teacher, it provided insight to the student's objective and subjective considerations of learning.

The entry for Week 15, which was the last week the students wrote an entry for, shows how Student 2 was able to reflect on the learning from the semester:

Student 2: Week 15

It is almost the end of semester. After I reviewed my study log, I could summarize three things that I learned from the writing class.

1. Documentation is powerful

I doubted if this study log is going to be useful for me. I thought this was for professor to help holistic evaluation on students and nothing more than that. But recording what I have learned turned out to be one of the most valuable works throughout the semester. I did not have to look up the whole textbook only to get a paper cut but rather just press 'ctrl+F' to find what I want to know. And when I work on study logs, I had to go over the materials again to reorganize what I did in class so I could review my works regularly.

2. Gain Confidence, Enjoy Writing

From writing small essays to full essays, I gained a lot of confidence during the actual writing phases. Given that this is my first English writing class, I think I have made a huge improvement. Based on free-writing, brainstorming, and making outlines, now I know what I should do before I initiate actual writing. Also, writing is really getting exciting after I succeeded in making a full piece of essay out of nothing. It is amazing that I already have written three essays throughout the semester!

3. Editing is Super Important

Even if I have wonderful outlines, first essay always has errors. I can read it over and fix those mistakes but when other people read my essay, they might find out some serious errors that I could not have found myself. Therefore, peer edit as well as self edit really does help to suggest better ways to modify the essay. Especially for the opinion essays, clashing of two different perspectives may fuel meaningful discussion which then gives us some good supporting details that can enrich the essay.

Additional Notes

If 'English Writing(1)' or any other advanced writing class opens next semester, I will definitely enrol the course. What I learned from the class is that writing should be carefully planned, and after the implementation it should be carefully reviewed to get a masterpiece out of it. To go through this process, my English skills should be improved. So during the winter vacation, I am going to read a lot of books so that my essays for the next semester will become better. It was great taking this lecture, thanks to the professor and all the classmates.

The excerpt offers insight into the Student's experience of learning from taking the class. The student mentioned explicitly how it was beneficial for him to document his learning in a learning journal, and how it enabled looking up learned content for review at later stages. In addition, the student commented on his changes in attitude towards writing, and how he felt he made an achievement through the class. He also commented on his plans to enhance his skills further during the vacation.

Student 3 Reflections of writing

Student 3 wrote her entries in Korean, and the data have been translated into English by the author. For Student 3, the learning journal served the purpose of enabling her to record and contemplate her weaknesses in learning.

Student 3: Week 12

[As a narrative essay involves describing an experience from the past, tense is very important. In particular, as tense in English is something I find difficult, I was careful to try to not make mistakes. However, a few mistakes were found during the peer editing activity and I realised again that my weakness lies in grammar. It was an opportunity to remind myself to be more careful from next time.]

Student 3 commented on what she found to be her weakness (grammar). The recording of this in the learning journal enabled her firstly to remember her realization, and then to put this realization into perspective. In Week 15, Student 3 also commented on improvements she observes in her learning:

Student 3: Week 15

[Over the past 15 weeks, I can notice a change in my writing – I can now write a lot faster. In the past I found editing my work to be bothersome and it always took me a long time to write a first draft. But now, editing is a given and I no longer feel hesitant to write a first draft. In addition, rather than having random, individual sentences, I can see that my writing is now connected with a logical flow.]

Student 3 mentioned how her pace in writing had improved. In addition, she also commented on her change in attitude towards the writing process (she noticed her change in attitude towards editing written work) and she felt her writing had improved too, with better coherence than previously.

Student 4 Reflections of writing

Student 4 also used the learning journal to record his subjective feelings about learning:

Student 4: Week 2

[When writing, no one else can help you when ideas are running around in your head. Only you can do something about it. Also, like when you have any concerns and feel better talking about them with a friend even though they don't actually give any concrete solutions, when you write things down you can organize your thoughts and feelings and think about them more deeply.]

The excerpt from Week 2 showed Student 4's thoughts on writing. The learning journal seems to have served the role of a personal diary for this student.

Student 4: Week 7

[One thing I realise from taking this class is that experience and interest are very important. Even if it's a difficult piece of writing, if I have the background information then it becomes a lot easier. Likewise, even if it's an easy piece of writing, it becomes difficult without any interest or background knowledge.]

In Week 7, Student 4 contemplated further. He commented on realisations he made during the course. Going beyond process and skills such as brainstorming, editing and such, he thought about elements which are needed for effective writing. He believed that experience and interest (passion) in the task or topic are needed for a good piece of writing.

Student 4: Week 15

Final Entry

[Through peer review, I could realise what needed to be revised. Looking at other's writing also enabled me learn a lot. I will be going to the army after this semester, which marks exactly half of my college life. My goal for these 2 years was to lay foundations for writing and speaking in English. I'm happy I could develop towards this goal through the class.]

In Week 15, in addition to mentioning what he could learn through peer review, Student 4 mentioned his personal goal which was to build up his English skills for his freshman and sophomore years. He seems to have been satisfied with his achievement of this goal through the writing class.

Summary

The excerpts, from four randomly-selected students, show how the learning journal, whether written in a student's L1 or L2, served various functions. It encouraged students to reflect on their own learning, such as in the case of Student 1's mention of simile use. It also enabled students to observe new habits they acquired during the course. In addition, the learning journal enabled students to identify a close relationship between reading and writing, as shown in the excerpt from Student 2's journal. The documenting of their own work also proved to be beneficial for students, with this being explicitly mentioned by Student 2. Through the documenting of their learning process and reflecting on such learning, students were able to notice their own developments and changes and identify their weaknesses. Although the data show individual variations in that some learners used the learning journal to reflect on their work, while others used it more for documenting, like a personal diary, nonetheless there is clear evidence of pedagogical usefulness of the learning journal. Even for the students who only documented their learning, this act of documenting or summarising their learning will have resulted in reflection to some degree, as they looked back at their learning and performance in class.

The findings of the current study are consistent with the literature in that evidence is seen of promoting students' critical and reflective thinking as well as drawing their attention to the process of translation (as suggested by Li, 1998). There is also evidence from the current study of the learning journals enabling students to analyse and review their own work and performance, recognize change and development and also set future goals (Lee, 2015). The unique aspect of the current study is insights it creates into the utility of learning journals in the context of low proficiency university students in Korea.

Conclusion

The current study examined the role of the learning journal in an undergraduate writing classroom in Korea. It shows there are various benefits of learning journals in this context. The learning journals have enabled multi-faceted perspectives of learning by facilitating students' exploration of their own learning through reflection, as well as serving as personal study diary allowing individuals to document their own learning. Learning journals could be applied to various classroom contexts so while the current study focused on the undergraduate writing classroom, there is great potential for application in other classroom contexts and across different levels of education.

About the author

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