

Asking the Writing Questions? Action Research in the Creative Writing Class

英作文指導の目的に沿った指導的な質問：英語の創作クラスにおけるアクション・リサーチ

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Abstract

This article describes a study of a third-year, Japanese university students on their process- and creative-writing skills writing class. In this class, the motivating goal was for students to submit a 50-word essay published to the JAF AE ESSC project¹, the author's to improve professionally. The research questions under investigation were: (1) is it possible to improve students' general language levels and, specifically, writing skills by introducing action research into the classroom? (2) Is it more motivating and effective than traditional approaches to writing instruction are? This article describes the action research undertaken. The positive results suggest benefit to the students from the various classroom tasks, and will necessarily affect content and methodology in the author's future writing classes.

本論は3年次の日本人大学生の英作文クラスにおけるプロセス作文・創作の技能の研究である。この授業の目標は学生に日本アジア英語学会の作文コンテストに応募するよう促すこと、本論の著者が職業的に進歩することである。研究課題は次のとおりである。(1) アクション・リサーチの手法を導入することにより学生の一般的な英語能力、および、作文能力を向上させることができるか。(2) 伝統的な作文の教育方法よりもこれは有効であるか。アクション・リサーチの具体的内容が本論で述べられる。リサーチの肯定的な結果から、学生が様々な課題から収穫を得たこと、著者の将来の作文授業の内容や手法に影響を与えることが予測される。

Introduction

In this study the author worked with a small group of six, third-year, Japanese university students on their process- and creative-writing skills. Their motivating goal

was to submit a 50-word essay and have it published in the JAF AE ESSC project¹, the author's to improve professionally. This article describes the action research undertaken

Context

Six English major students opted for the Lafaye seminar for their two final years of university. Since 2000 the Lafaye seminar had offered an introductory course to discourse analysis and corpus linguistics (using Guy Cook, 1989, and Ron Carter/Michael McCarthy, 1997, texts for support) and culminated in a graduation thesis in English on a lexical item - a discourse marker or other feature of spoken discourse. This was expected to be too linguistically-challenging for incoming students in 2006 and it was therefore decided offer a creative-writing course linguistic studies being postponed for a semester. It was anticipated that small successes in writing would raise students' self-esteem, and at the same time they would improve their reading skills. Learning about writing styles and techniques would both promote fluency and tap into their sensitive sides, which would then influence their own way of expressing themselves in writing. Because of the way in which the course was set up it also allowed the teacher to introduce some learner strategies in the classroom. At the same time there was an opportunity to address a methodology question in an action research framework.

Hypothesis

The hypotheses were that: (1) it is possible to improve students' general language levels and, specifically, writing skills by introducing action research into the classroom (2) introducing an action research element into a course is motivating and likely to be more effective than traditional approaches to writing instruction. Along the way questions arose including (a) will the students be amenable to reflecting on the learning process (with a view to taking more responsibility for their studies)? (b) how will they respond to peer input and correction, and will they see this as beneficial, accustomed as they were to the teacher-fronted classroom? And (c) Is the input (i.e. texts and instruction on style) planned appropriate for this kind of course?

Literature Review

Why action research?

Action research could be described as classroom research on a shoestring. It is a kind

of research that is accessible to every teacher. Simply put, to do action research all you need is a classroom, a problem, and an idea on how to solve the problem. (Poel and Homan 1997, pg 71).

Action research was eminently suitable to the kind of study the author wished to pursue. It would not be wide-reaching but limited to one class in which it was thought some improvements could be made, if the study's results proved positive. The term 'exploratory teaching', coined by Allwright and Bailey (1991) has sometimes been used instead of 'action research'. In essence it is a study which allows us to proceed without too much concern about whether we are presently teaching or researching. It allows teachers, in Nunan's (1997, p 14) words to generate insights rather than establishing truths. It is qualitative, dicit Altrichter (1993) rather than a slave to statistics. In a nutshell it helps us grow professionally and serve our students better, without going for protracted research.

That which distinguishes action research from more traditional varieties is the procedure, which is not linear, but more of a 'spiral of increasingly aware experience' (Edge, 2001, p 3) which usually encompasses some or all of the following steps:

- action – in the sense that one is always in the middle of action
- observation of what is happening, leading to more specific foci of interest
- reflection on the focus which has been identified, leading to
- planning that forms the basis for future
- action to improve the situation supported by
- observation in order to evaluate the changes made

(*ebid*, p 3)

Another eminent linguist, David Nunan, who has developed the action research theory and spread the word to teachers around the world, proposed a similar action research cycle, of seven steps:

Initiation → preliminary investigation → hypothesis → intervention →
evaluation → dissemination → follow-up

(Nunan, 1997, p 90)

Procedure

For the purposes of the present action research, the author will adapt the Kemmis & McTaggart's (1988) straightforward four phase procedure:

Phase 1 develop a plan of action to improve what is already happening

Phase 2 act(ion) to implement the plan

Phase 3 observe the effects of the action in the context in which it occurs

Phase 4 reflect on these effects

Background / Initiation / Observation

The teacher had decided to replace a linguistics course with one focusing on creative writing, something to which students were not accustomed even in their native Japanese. The attention in English to date had almost exclusively been on form. Indeed, the teacher had noticed in a basic academic studies class with the same group in their freshman year at the university that when faced with a blank page and asked to write on a particular topic, they had had great difficulty expressing themselves, even when topics were fairly mundane. This difficulty with self-expression was one that the author wished to address. It was hoped that some grammatical improvement would be achieved too. Not finding a suitable commercial textbook to suit her needs the author decided to devise her own syllabus for use in a 90-minute class weekly over 10 weeks of a 14-week term.

Intervention / Action / Method

The class followed a fairly traditional input - output routine, as laid out below, with an additional element, reflection, being required of all students.

Input →	Output →	Reflection →
Meaningful text study (Text appreciation: short stories / poems)	Presentations by students Guided writing Rewriting Peer Work	Journal writing
Tense studies	Discussion	
Style studies		
Descriptive Vocabulary		
Imagery / Personification		
Rhyme studies		
Rhythm studies		

The class proceeded as follows:

Before the class proper each week, students were given a theme for a 5-minute speaking warm-up, in order for them to start to focus in English. Following this, during the input stage, very short emotive passages of prose and poetry were introduced, discussed and analysed, in order for the students respond to them and later to endeavour to emulate them. At the same time a number of aspects of creative writing, including descriptive vocabulary, principles of vocabulary nuancing, advanced uses of tense, approaches to rhyme and rhythm, imagery were taught, in order to prepare them for the subsequent creative writing tasks.

During the production stage students had opportunities for directed writing, rewriting / multiple drafting, class discussions and peer work. These sessions on peer work and multiple drafting distinguished the course content from more traditional writing courses. A challenging part of the production section was for students (in later weeks of the course) to analyse, individually, one of the Chicken Soup for the Soul stories, and point out interesting language use, rhyme, rhythm and so forth. Each student was required to teach the class what they had discovered, in the form of an individual presentation task.

Finally, before the end of each class, the students were allowed 10 minutes in order to think through the class and write a journal, responding to class content.

The cyclic part of the class and course was the input → output → reflection part. This appears linear in print. However, in practice the class would move back and forth through these steps.

ESSC and Emiratia (Hassall, P., ed., 2004)

Here, an additional element of the class, the ESSC, needs further explanation. The ESSC or Extra Short Story Competition added an interesting dimension to the class and was motivating for the students as they embarked on their new writing careers. The ESSC was central to the course.

The ESSC was devised by Peter Hassall at Zayed University in the United Arab Emirates. The university's literature club ran a competition for which writers would submit a 50-word piece of writing in English, fiction or non-fiction. Many of the entries were included in a book later edited by Hassall and named Emiratia. The ESSC model has now been exported to Japan by the academic organization called JAF AE, (see previous footnote). This 2006 competition attracted the attention of many writing teachers all over Japan and prompted them to have their students submit entries. The arrival of the ESSC concept in Japan was certainly timely as far as the author's own creative writing class was concerned as it provided a ready-made goal with which to present the students.

Peter Hassall's book provided a cornerstone in the class, as did another book of short pieces of writing, *Chicken Soup for the Soul* referred to above. The latter is certainly not considered as great literature, but contains many highly emotive stories, prompting various responses and providing great potential for discussion. It was also useful for raising students' awareness of style and writing techniques. Peter Hassall's book, of course, provided a model for the writing of extremely short pieces.

Response / Evaluation / Reflection

Because this piece of action research has two strands of study going on at the same time, the one the teacher's study of the class and methodology, the other the students' study of their own learning and study methods, this section will be divided into two parts, students' reflections and teacher's reflection.

Student Reflections

At the end of each class students were required to reflect on the class. The following questions were asked:

1. What did we do today? 2. What was the purpose of that? 3. Did you find something useful? What? Why? Why not?

In later reflections, when students felt more comfortable with the process of thinking back on their actions and reflecting critically, the following questions were added:

a. Can friends help? b. Has your ability improved?

A selection of responses follows:

- I learned to vary my use of tense. I found it powerful to write about a dream in the present tense.
- Writing is still difficult for me but it is interesting to recognize nuances and decide how to choose from similar words.
- I learned that it is more important to show readers our mind, not just make sentences with random words.
- I learned how to respond sensitively to my partners' work and not offend them.
- I improved so much
- We learned how to use rhyme effectively
- -Every student in the class is intelligent and can say and hear each other's comments- It is good that friends could help me see weak points that I couldn't find.

Teacher Reflection

Over a ten-week period, the teacher observed the students' improvements in writing, in their use of some of the stylistic devices that had been taught in earlier weeks, including improved use of rhyme, a more sensitive choice of vocabulary, correct use of tense, attempts at using rhythm and, in particular, an impressively developed use of

imagery and personification. They also displayed a new ability to create suspense and add punchlines. Some teacher reflections follow:

M, who would put a whole list of images and pictures back to back in earlier work, learned to choose one theme and depict it more accurately and to use image more sparingly to greater effect.

Compare: 'In June, people are depressed. Too much rain, humid days, a million umbrellas, the clothes mountain' with a later piece: 'Hay fever worries people who have an allergy...People who have hay fever sneeze, their noses are dripping and their eyes are bloodshot'

K. developed a great desire to master rhyme and even graduated on to half rhyme: 'I'm worrying about your right side. I don't want you to feel sad'

T. in later writing used more imagination. A. took to using tense skillfully: 'I am in the school. I have a knife in my hand. Someone follows me, shouting.' The tension mounting is very clear here. Or again, in A.'s writing about a rainy day: 'I saw the reflection of the rainbow in the puddle.' Similarly, Y. the most skilled of the group from a writing perspective, owing to a background in song-writing, showed greater control of lexis and image in general. The complete poem is reproduced below:

I want to look up at the sky
 I want to stare at the stars
 Brilliant stars
 And I want to shine too like the stars
 I want to stare at the stars
 To wish upon stars:
 Not to slip down like the shooting star in the distant future

In addition to the changes noticed in the students' writing skills, their ability to discuss things frankly and less stiltedly at the beginning of class in the warm-up discussion, and when talking about texts or each others' work grew steadily over the weeks was

also observed.

Outcomes

From a clear and simple class structure, enormous benefit is evident:

1. Very tangible improvements in quality of writing were noted. Students saw the class as a non-threatening experience in which they could share ideas and improve their creative writing skills. The length of the essay was so short that it was both stimulating, motivating, fun and above all manageable for lower level students.

2. Students saw that they benefit concretely from the rewrites and drafts which focused them on structure as well as style. They benefited from the feedback from the teacher in this regard corroborating what Cowie (2001 p28) found: 'that feedback validates student work and effort by showing that their teacher cares about and is interested in their writing'; students also saw that they benefited from the peer work which they appreciated when they became accustomed to it, and from the reflection work which was a new concept to them. The latter in particular made them more aware of what they were doing and why, and forced them to think about the perceived benefits.

Implications

The author found that while it was difficult to juggle teaching with a research project, in particular because it relied on self-generated materials and planning, (no text suiting the class' requirement) the action research approach to this seminar class was a success upon which to breed more. It had an impact on the students' writing which improved significantly, answering hypothesis 1. In addition, it was motivating. Though it is difficult to gauge whether it was more motivating than a traditional approach to writing instruction, response to hypothesis 2 therefore remains tenuous. In answer to corollary questions, the introduction of learner strategies into the class, reflection, self-improvement and peer-evaluation, markedly influenced the students' learning styles; the text used and instruction on style were adequate for the purposes of the course.

Each study has its downside. While this course offered benefits on a creative scale it didn't address the problem of weaknesses in structure because it is not designed to be

a grammar class. It was not possible to resolve this issue within the context of the study. However, it was a problem the author grappled with, wondering how to give students information on form, bearing in mind Truscott's (1996) conclusions about the dangers of grammar correction, which can prove un-useful or even hurt writers' development. The interim solution was to find ways to help students to become more independent in finding their own errors rather than pointing them out from the teacher's chair. This aspect is unresolved and needs further enquiry.

This fact notwithstanding, the achievement of getting a lower-level student, T, struggling with grammar, to write the following creative passage is seen not as a failure but rather as a success:

I get hay fever today. I ever sniffle since this morning. After I get up I used a lot of tissues. My room's trash box is like a mountain of tissues. I think feel bad. Because, I have to buy many tissues and my room's trash box is always full.

¹ JAF AE : The Japanese Association for Asian Englishes ESSC : Extremely short story competition administered in Japan by JAF AE in 2006. <http://essc.fit.ac.jp/>

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