TOWARDS COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH IN WRITING ACADEMIC ENGLISH

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to identify and raise various questions concerning the development of teacher autonomy and learner autonomy through action research. Over the past few years, I have tried to develop my teaching of writing to first-year undergraduate non-English majors through action research. In this inquiry, I have mainly focused on two aspects of the process of writing, namely peer reader responses and writer-review plans. As the main action research focus of this paper, these two aspects are presented in three distinct representative episodes. At the same time, I have worked with various forms of data collection and interpretation. Although these methods may be characterized under the umbrella term of 'action research', they are not unproblematic. The problems of conducting action research constitutes a parallel thread of this paper and are presented as three reflections, with each reflection following its particular classroom episode.

Teaching context

I teach English at the Foreign Language Center of the University of Tsukuba where each first-year student takes three English courses consisting of one 75-minute lesson a week, over three terms of 10 weeks each. For the writing course, students' starting levels range from low-intermediate through to intermediate, with between 40 and 60 students in each writing class. The writing course moves from an EGP emphasis in the first term through to an EAP focus in the third.

Peer reader responses and writer review-plans

Through the three terms, peer reader responses and writer review-plans form a major focus of classroom activity. Each student writer has a B5 notebook for the writing course, where the writer writes on the left page only. The right page is reserved for peer reader responses. Students are expected to complete writing as homework before working in class in co-operative pairs and three's, swapping notebooks and writing their reader

responses. The writer later reads the responses, reflects on them, and writes a plan for the next draft. As the course develops, these peer reader responses are guided towards becoming more specific and genre-oriented; increasingly, too, writers are asked to focus on problems that they can identify in their writing and to plan more and more specific changes. That is the case now. At the start of the first episode in April 1998, reader responses formed the starting focus.

Episode one: April to June 1998

With a large writing class, one recurrent problem I face is understanding what students do in group and pair work. To address this, I video-taped, near the beginning of the first term, a peer reader group discussion and noticed that the students were responding more to their peers than to their peers' texts. This made me question the peer response procedures that I was using (Barfield, 1999), as well as read more of the literature on peer responding (Leki, 1990; Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Reid, 1993; Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Stanley, 1994; Carson & Nelson, 1996; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). In particular, I focussed on the paper by Stanley and adopted a set of peer response strategies, as shown in Table 1.

From these two starting points, I decided to train the students in those strategies and to see which peer responses they felt would be most useful to receive (*pre-practice preference*), as well as which peer responses they felt had been most useful after receiving written feedback from their peer(s) (*post-practice preference*). This formed the first action research cycle.

What I learnt from the students' pre-practice and post-practice preferences was that only one type of peer reader response was stable in their before and after choices. This was *advising*. In other words, students who chose *pointing*, *questioning* and *praising* as their pre-practice

Table 1

Example peer responses for coaching (based on Stanley, 1994)

Peer Response Strategy	Example
Pointing	*When you say ...., what do you mean?*
Questioning	*What's the main idea of this paragraph?*
Advising	*.................... . You need to explain this more because ...)*

Praising	*This is a good part because this is detailed and clear*
Collaborating	*Trying giving the reader a more specific idea of what happened*

preference changed their choice through interaction with a reader. (*Collaborating* was chosen by only one student.) The students who chose *advising* as their stable choice tended to indicate a concern with 'forward planning' and 'reader awareness'. They reported that they were mainly concerned with the next text that they were intending to write and with relating clearly to the reader through their writing ("*Advising because this type of response tells me most directly what is missing in my text for the reader to understand more and I can easily use the answer I make for advising for the next draft*" and "*Advising because even if I meant to write what I think definitely, the advice which the reader or listener gave makes me feel that my compositions are not complete.*")

In contrast, the students who chose "questioning" and "pointing" post-practice had all changed their preference for reader response type: Generally, their comments tended to focus on themselves as writers and on their texts as language, and much less on their texts as a development of communication with their readers. However, students who chose "praising" tended to highlight their emotional needs ("*When I read responses, I feel happy and think I'll write better next time*").

From this cycle, I was able to trace four types of writer through the reader responses that they found most useful: (a) *planners* (preference: advising), (b) *thinkers* (preference: questioning), (c) *detailers* (preference: pointing), and (d) *feelers* (preference: praising). Though I assumed that each type of writer had their own strengths, this part of the inquiry started to make me more aware of the role of planning as a meta-cognitive writing skill. However, for the time being, I focused on encouraging all students to broaden their use of reader responses.

Reflection on episode one

Act-review-plan formed the basic cycle in how I at first understood reflective learning and teaching through action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988:11). Looking back now, I find it interesting that I delayed taking up what the students had indicated about the importance of forward-planning. Why did I delay?

First, what I have so far characterized as action research is a weak teaching-centred interpretation in that it naturalises the existing authority of the teacher over his or her

learners as research subjects rather than includes them as co-owners of the inquiry. Moreover, I did not have a specific intention to examine a particular pattern in what was happening in the classroom (McMahon, 1999). Rather, I had introduced a new procedure and instructed my students from a clean slate, imposing Stanley's model (evolved in the different context of an intensive ESL programme) without carefully attending to where they were in their own writing development. That is, I had mistaken point for pattern (Clarke, 1998), and, although the gathering of data did lead to a changed awareness of the reasons for my students' preferences, the research cycle did not make me question the students' already existing patterns of reader response interaction.

Thus, the delay can be first highlighted by the limited participation of my students: "My students took part in the research, but were not fully involved... and any need to look at the data differently was limited." Another way to understand the delay is to see the problem-setting and consequent pattern-noticing as narrow: I was focused on reader responses in the data collection and interpretation. This prevented me from taking *immediate* greater account of how students were organizing their forward-planning. It also delayed me in seeing a more complex interaction between plan, genre and response.

Interim re-focus: September to October 1998

In the second term, I began to ask my students to make plans between different drafts. Although I did not formally collect data, except through reading the different plans that the students individually wrote, my attention was becoming more directed towards the question of planning, as if the previous phase of intentional action research on reader responses—despite the faults noted—provided for greater attention to other teaching / learning routines.

Although I encouraged my students to fine-tune their reader responses and develop more elaborate writing plans, I concentrated on guiding them to look back and note *specific difficulties* in their previous writing and plan *general decisions* for their next writing. In other words, the forward decision-making was directed towards accomplishing the task easily and successfully within the individual writer's terms of reference. The planning was not directed towards specific genre features and specific writer goals. The following writer plan shows the kind of fluent but unfocussed writer planning that many students managed:

Table 2

General decision-making for summary writing (following early guidelines)

I plan to write the summary in the following way. First I try the rapid reading. By this work, I'll catch the outline and understand what this writer want to say. Next, I read carefully. In this work, if there are words which is difficult to guess the meaning for me, I must use English-English dictionary. Third, I cut many sentences which is not important. For example, I cut too detailed point. At the same time I mark sentences which is important. Next I separate general parts from detailed points. After these works will be finished, I must reorder the marked points, general parts and detailed points. In first paragraph, I'll write general points. In the next paragraph I'll write detailed points (...)

The writer reports a series of potentially useful tactical decisions to make for the task at hand, but has not been taught to 'scaffold' these decisions into a higher-level strategic combination that takes account of appropriate genre conventions and criteria. The writer is thus unable to move out of a narrative sequence of her own thinking (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987).

So, although I had understood some pieces of the plan-genre-respond jigsaw better, I was still moving from one part of the jigsaw to another rather than seeing how the pieces could fit each other at the same time. These fragmentary links also characterize the effect of action research in the first episode: Data had been collected across the whole class and some interesting insights gained, but a holistic sense of direction was lacking, although there was a gradual re-focus under way.

Episode two: April to June 1999

The second episode is characterized by an effort towards a more 'here-and-now' interpretation of action research. I became more interested in the real learning preferences of my students. The puzzles about peer reader responses multiplied as I realized that I did not know what kind of responses were most likely to produce changes in a writer's writing. Thus, having narrowed things down to strategies recommended by Stanley, I moved back to looking for actual examples of writer uptake of reader responses. A year on

from the first cycle, I looked closely at a sample of 20 student writers who (a) had received reader responses to their first drafts of an informal letter to a classmate and (b) had taken up in their plans and later drafts points that their peer readers had mentioned in their responses. This allowed me to reach a number of highly tentative generalizations (shown in Table 3).

A number of points can be highlighted here. In terms of the realizations of the reader requests to the writer, there is little evidence of face-saving distancing through elaborate functional language. Rather, the requests are framed in relatively direct ways, using some of the revised cues explicitly extended from the students' own practice. Second, apart from the example involving generalized praise, the readers are specific in how they refer to the writer's text and make suggestions to the writer. Third, although the writers' plans involve specific content changes, they nevertheless tend to operate at the paragraph level of organization and miss framing content revisions in precise local terms as well.

Table 3
Example peer responses taken up by writers in their review-plans

· **Precise neutral / critical requests from the reader to add content tend to lead to specific content planning decisions**
Reader response: In your letter, the part that "I cannot ski." Why? I want to know the reason why you can't.
Writer's plan: In my second draft, I plan to change second part. I'm going to explain why I cannot ski and why many people think people in Niigata can ski. Also, I want to change the part saying about music. I want to tell enthusiasm for music and my dream of composing tune in detail.

Specific requests from the reader about genre may lead to specific organization planning decisions about the genre aspect in itself
Reader response: ...directed to the reader an opening paragraph is dropped. Just write about this point, then your letter would be much better... This part needs changing because the text changes topics suddenly. Please put a conjunction and make the letter more natural.

Writer's plan: Reading the two reader responses I want to make a clearer opening paragraph directed to the reader. And opening the movie topic, I want to put a conjunction and make the letter natural. In my second draft, I plan to change the opening part. In particular, I want to make a clear opening paragraph directed to the reader. Then I plan to change movie part. I want to make short this part because it is too long.

- **Generalized praise from the reader may lead to random content and organizational changes**

  Reader response: …Your letter was perfect.

  Writer's plan: I used "and" or "but" for many time. In my second draft, I want to correct sentences with words like "in addition" instead of "and", "while" instead of "but". I also want to check grammar and spelling carefully. What's more I intend to make it's content clear.

- **Specific requests from the reader to cut content may lead to non-specific content planning decisions**

  Reader response: …Your letter should have suitable opening and closing …I think second and fourth paragraph is long … I think this part, second paragraphing "Seeing her … a teacher in the future" is not necessary because you say almost same thing later fourth paragraph, aren't you.

  Writer's plan: I am going to change the first and last paragraph. I'll make them longer. Also I'll make the third paragraph longer by explaining more detailed.

In sum, I had learned that my students responded best to short critical/neutral requests from the reader about content and genre organization. Furthermore, although I had earlier considered 'praise' an important aspect of responding to others' writing in its own right—one of the strategies recommended by Stanley, as well as an aspect of reader-writer interaction which intuitively seemed to carry some weight for co-operative learning—'praise' now seemed to have little effect *in isolation* in encouraging writers to make changes in their later writing. (See Cardelle and Corno, 1981, for a related finding about the effect of teacher feedback.) More telling still was that I could now see more clearly some kind of gap between how readers responded and writers planned.

Reflection on episode two

Reading through the student notebooks, identifying which writers had taken up the reader responses, copying the relevant pages, seeing patterns, and making sense of the data took me over 12 hours. This time, however, was spread out between the end of the first term and the beginning of the second, with the summer break between. As a result, there was a long interval between collecting the data and acting upon it.

That is one recurrent problem in collecting multiple texts for action research. The effect is to create a time-delay in changing classroom procedures. As a colleague of mine has observed, action research with once-a-week classes may easily focus on the next year of students rather than those students from who the data is collected. One challenge, then, is to find forms of data collection and interpretation that benefit more the students here and now.

A second constraint is the tension between wanting students to achieve quickly observable changes in their planning, responding and writing, and accepting that such changes need to be fostered across a large class group over a longer period. Action research, it seems, needs to be conducted in constant mini-cycles for an elaborate understanding to evolve; if not, it risks pushing the teacher and students to temporary changes of routine rather than more deeply considered actions and learning.

A third constraint that became clear was the difficulty of doing action research alone. Part of the process of making sense of the data needs to involve others if the effort is to be sustained. In this respect, one change during Episode Two was that a group of teachers interested in writing started meeting to discuss their writing pedagogy and action research, as well as present examples of student writing and other data[1]. The group presented at JALT99 and made plans for a second presentation at JALT2000. Without that support network, I doubt whether I would have maintained and broadened my motivation for looking at questions of writing in such detail—nor come to greater collaboration with my students.

From also doing an action research seminar [2], I began to re-think ways of closing the gaps that I had previously noticed. I tried to understand better the possible links between reader responses, writers' plans and genre specific criteria. At the same time, connecting the process of action research with teaching and narrowing the delays also shaped the third action research episode.

Episode three: November 1999 to March 2000

The third episode involved interviewing small groups of students outside class for 60-90 minutes in order to understand retrospectively how they had made decisions while working on full academic genres in the third term. These interviews began from one simple question ("What was easy / difficult / puzzling for you about doing academic critique-reviews / the research project?"), with my interventions limited to those of *understander* in order to listen to the knowledge base my students worked from (Edge, 1992).

In particular, I re-learnt more clearly how different writers maintained a constant monitoring of the connections between how they read, what they intended to write, and what they did write. They also attended to how they needed to adjust their understanding of the source academic text, as well as the local and global organization of their critique-review drafts as they revised (see Table 4 for an interview abstract with Yuki, a first-year humanities student, where Y=Yuki and A=author). What struck me most was the clear goal orientation of Yuki's reading process in that she was able to relate her reading to what she would be writing, selectively paraphrasing parts of the source text according to her planned summary. What also impressed me was her focus on the difficulty of cutting from her draft summary, which seemed to indicate that editing down a text is a much more complex task for writers than is generally considered (Leki, 1992: 128; see also Table 3).

Table 4

Example interview abstract showing a writer's reading and writing decisions

Y: I have two easy points first, it was easy and fun for me to read the articles because I chose articles which are interesting for me and I could know various ideas of authors

A: yeah of the authors yeah right which articles did you choose

Y: first I chose womens' social status

A: right

Y: and power in Africa

A: right

Y: and second err I choose homeless mothers in the United States (...) I ...It was easy to summarize ummm because I could underline um which are important when I read

A: I see I see

Y: I used different colour in order to underline

A: right

Y: here   *[A: OK you're showing me your article and it's got underlined points and points highlighted in yellow]*

Y: yes

A: and you've made notes in Japanese about …What what

Y: mea… meaning

A: about the meaning I see OK so what's the difference between the underlined part and the and the yellow part (laughter)

Y: mmmm eto … gomen …Yellow part is more important mmm than red part

A: I see more important in what for you…. When you say more important what do you mean?

Y: mmmmm…yellow part… mmmm…mmm… can use writing conclusion part in summary

A: I see all right yeah .. and the underlined part

Y: when I write summary… I…I…I…change this sentence in my own words

A: OK OK …so let me just check the underlined part is something you think you're going to use in your summary and change into your own words, and the yellow part is something you're going to use in the conclusion

Y: yes

A: of your summary

Y: summary

A: interesting

Y: I have difficult part…my summary became always too long so it was difficult to cut part and I had mistakes my writing such as preposition and I must study more (laughter) (…)

A: so what did…you do then

Y: mmmm I read again

A: yes

Y: and mmm changed words more short

A: aha

Y: another…another word   *[A: so Yuki's looking at her notebook]*

Y: for example this part "there are two reasons for this" one two three four five six but I changed "reasons are as follows" this is four words (laughter)

A: so you were trying to shorten certain phrases yeah

Y: yes

A: yeah and I can see you put a line through

Y: ahhh I thought these parts mmm should cut

A: should be cut

Y: should be cut

A: yeah yeah OK OK the other thing I notice when you is is you did a mindmap yeah now when … can I just ask you and you've got direct quotations when did you do this … the first time you were reading or after you were reading the article … before you underlined or before you highlighted in yellow when when did you do this

Y: after reading the article and underline

Reflection on episode three

On the positive side, the format of the interviews as much as the content helped me go further towards the position of "learning from others what their skill in writing consists of" (Bazerman, 1994: 157). Changing both role and process changed what I might notice and learn.

On the difficult side, the problem of time delay still exists. Ideally, I aim, at the next interview, to present the students with a summary of what they said at the previous interview, so that they may question my interpretation of their learning and we can collaboratively build our understanding of how each writer goes about writing. (The students who took part in the interviews have agreed to continue the collaboration although their first-year writing course has finished.) Realistically, transcribing and summarizing such interviews is enormously time-consuming, and I need to find more time-efficient ways to work with such a research process and to involve my students more fully. Just as I need to develop my interview technique to avoid various forms of bias (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990: 84 ff.), I also need to find ways to structure the exploration as part of the course, rather than as research that I do separately.

On the puzzling side, even with such long interview sessions, I have the feeling that I am still only scratching the surface of what students do as they become academic writers. For example, one puzzling point that Yuki mentioned later in the interview was that she wasn't sure when to use what Swales and Feak term 'summary reminder phrases' in her summary writing (Swales & Feak, 1994: 121-122)—that is, where and when writers use reporting phrases to cite the ideas of others. It is a simple point, yet not at all easy to answer. Indeed, I cannot see an easy way to understanding such puzzles better except through continuing the interviews and trying to recycle what comes up in such interviews into classroom procedures and tasks in the writing course.

In this respect, Yuki's complex re-construction of the combination between her reading and writing goals had suggested to me that it is largely in the pre-writing / planning stages between reading and writing that writers may pre-set their later success or not for a particular writing task. That is, the writing of subsequent drafts may well be largely determined by the skill of the writer in their earlier note-taking, mind-mapping and paraphrasing, and in creating a range of specific problem-solving sub-goals, which they then can flexibly adjust. If this is so, then where better to continue than by using extracts

from Yuki's interview as part of the course content in the first term of the present academic year (2000-2001)? (See Appendix 1 for an example sequence.)

Reflection-conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to highlight a number of contradictions and constraints in doing action research. Simple questions such as "How does a reader respond to another's writing?", "How do writers plan their writing?" and "How can responses and plans be connected to genre criteria?" could not be easily answered, and the effort to understand such questions led to an extended series of inquiries. To this end, I presented three representative episodes and put forward three reflections to capture the process of developing action research in a particular context.

In this multi-layered explanation, the process moved towards a shared learning / teaching / research agenda, although this may also be seen as a temporary idealization of a far more complex undertaking. Indeed, I am not certain whether what I have characterized as action research in the first two episodes is in fact action research. It is idiosyncratic and localized; it is also teacher-centred and non-participatory (Auerbach, 1994). It lies perhaps closer to exploratory practice than action research proper (Allwright, 1997).

The problem of capturing what action research does or does not constitute is not confined to this paper. Hopkins, for example, reviews various influential interpretations of action research by Kemmis (1983), Ebbutt (1985) and Elliot (1991) in order to note differences and map out the large overlaps in post-Lewinian action research frameworks in education (Hopkins, 1993: 43-61). Taking a pragmatic line, Hopkins settles for the term 'classroom research by teachers' before proposing six principles for teachers to work from (Hopkins, 1993: 57). These are:

1) 'the teacher's primary job is to teach, and any research method should not interfere or disrupt the teaching method' (p.57);

2) 'the method of data collection must not be too demanding on the teacher's time' (p.58);

3) 'the methodology employed must be reliable enough to allow teachers to formulate hypotheses confidently and develop strategies applicable to the classroom' (p.58);

4) 'the research problem undertaken by the teacher should be one to which he or she is committed' (p.59);

5) 'the need for teacher-researchers to pay close attention to the ethical procedures surrounding their work' (p.59);

6) 'as far as possible classroom research should adopt a 'classroom exceeding' perspective' (p.59);

With regard to the episodes presented in this paper, I feel that the above principles miss an explicit emphasis on collaborative student involvement, which I identified as a central feature in the development of the research process. Furthermore, Hopkins does not discuss what written forms of presentation action research might take except for the need for 'written reports'. Here, in trying to select, include, cut and highlight key events from a three-year inquiry, I have noticed, within the writing process, a vastly underrated challenge in finding a format and flow that faithfully capture the living heart of such work. Choosing the episode-reflection genre for this paper was not my initial direction; rather, that choice came through reading, discussing and critiquing with several colleagues, which in itself further extends the notion of collaboration.

Indeed, the three research episodes presented here came, over time, to meet those six criteria for the most part, but the reflections on those episodes also demonstrated where contradictions and anomalies may lie in the process itself. As a result, it may well be necessary to extend the criteria proposed by Hopkins in order to highlight the need for both collaboration and experimental formats in presenting action research for wider dissemination.

These last two points have been highlighted by various researchers. Whereas student collaboration is explicitly covered by Cosgrove (Cosgrove: 1981, cited in Walker: 1985), Walker himself addresses issues of presenting research, suggesting that there has been greater development of research techniques than ways of presentation (Walker, 1985:181). More recently, Freeman has advanced detailed arguments for teacher-researchers to experiment with genres in presenting their inquiries (Freeman, 1998:146-176). So, a more complete set of principles might also include:

7) 'the willingness to involve the students in the action research process, by negotiating with them about the procedure, consulting them regularly and sharing the information collected with them' (Cosgrove, 1981: 21, cited in Walker,1985);

8) the willingness to accept the challenge and responsibility of 'using new, as well as conventional forms' for representing teacher-research to a wider public (Freeman, 1998:175).

Notwithstanding the difficulties in conducting and representing such a research process, it seems likely that in trying to understand better learners' constructions of knowledge and decision-making, a teacher-as-action-researcher may develop a more contextually appropriate pedagogy for a skills course such as writing, as well as their own expertise in doing such collaborative action research.

That remains an enormous challenge in terms of time and participatory process, above all else, unless ecological ways are found to align the action research as part of the course itself. Such a shared exploration, in the end, is the core link between teacher autonomy, learner autonomy and action research. It is a difficult connection to piece together and sustain, but one that is, I believe, very much worth the attention that it requires.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. Tim Ashwell, Andy Barfield, Neil Cowie, Alan Milne, Mike Nix and Ethel Ogane form the core of the Tokyo area WAFFLE group (*Writing and Feedback in Foreign Language Education*).

2. AREOL (*Action Research and Evaluation On-Line*) is an on-line action research seminar offered twice a year by Bob Dick of the University of Southern Cross, Australia. Worth doing at least once, it is available at:

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arhome/html.

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