Producing a Student-Written Website: Negotiating Process, Genre, and Pedagogy in Publishing L2 English Writing

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要旨

筆者は、本論文において、学生によって書かれたウェブサイト（Life in Kochi）を作成する際に筆者が頼っている、理論的根拠、教授法、教室でのテクニックについて検証する。EPIC（Kochi University's English Program for International Communication）に参加する学生は、本県での生活の文化的・経済的側面に関する特集記事を創作する。筆者は、１学期の間に、10－15名の EFL 中級程度の学生からなるグループが、初めての不慣れなジャンルとの出会いに始まり、多数の草稿を書くことを通して、トピックの探求と展開及び調査と学外インタビューへと移行し、授業最終日のウェブサイト上での公開にいかにして到達するかを説明する。本論文の末尾において、英作文の「教員」であり、同時に公的なウェブサイトの「編集者」であることがもたらす緊張状態についても簡潔に論じる。

Abstract

In this paper, I explore the rationale, strategies and classroom techniques I rely on to produce the student-written website, Life in Kochi. Students in Kochi University's English Program for International Communication (EPIC) create feature articles about the cultural and economic life of our prefecture. I will explain how in one semester a group of 10 to 15 intermediate-level EFL students is moved through a first look at an unfamiliar genre, to topic exploration and development, to research and off-campus interviews, through multiple drafts and onto final publication on the website on the last day of class. At the end of the paper, I briefly discuss the tension of simultaneously being a writing "teacher" and an "editor" of a public website.

Introduction

There is a not unreasonable assumption that EFL students at university should learn to write in the academic discourse genre. Silva (1990) points out that this is the type of writing that they would be required to do should they find themselves in an American university. For our students, this genre is similar to the kind of writing required in competency tests such as the TOEFL or IELTS which could well have a direct impact on their professional careers. Gaining the skills necessary to succeed in a Western academic discourse community, however, is a daunting task even for highly motivated EFL students in Japan. Additionally, there

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remains a serious motivational problem with most academic writing assignments: pedagogical intent notwithstanding, the genuine purpose of both writer and reader is to generate a course grade. The actual content of the writing is often of little consequence. This is especially true at the undergraduate level where students can struggle to find anything of interest to say. And unlike what might be called "real writing", it is invariably the case that the reader (the teacher) knows more about the subject than the writer (Reid & Kroll, 1995). As Horowitz (1986) admits in his critique of the process approach to teaching writing, the writing assigned in composition classes is "simulated" writing. No wonder few students feel eager to write, and fewer teachers are intrinsically motivated to read, even a single draft of what amounts to a content-less paper.

Writing for a real audience stands in sharp contrast to typical EFL classroom writing. The communication of content is a first-order priority. The author has something to say and expects that a reader will attend to that content in a meaningful way. In this sense, it is the written equivalent of a genuine conversation with a real human being. Real writing invites real readers, and real readers inspire real writing. But what are we to do in the context of an EFL composition class where students' writing will only be read and evaluated by the teacher? One tactic is to break out of the classroom, and perhaps the most effective way to do this is to publish interesting student writing online which then can attract an outside audience. However, for reasons outlined above, this "interesting writing" is highly unlikely to be typical academic writing. There is, however, a related genre of writing that is often more genuinely interesting and calls on many of the same skills required in academic writing: journalism. While academic writing has unique features and conventions that clearly distinguish it from other genre (Johns, 2003), the underlying skills and processes map neatly to journalism. Ip (2017) summarizes these as:

> *"... referring to sources; quoting and paraphrasing; note-taking and summarizing; planning, drafting and editing; writing clear and well-structured paragraphs; improving text organization; ensuring text 'flows'; improving grammar and accuracy"* (p. 47).

In many ways, writing can be considered a craft with skills to be mastered. Though it may be hard to measure quantifiably, common experience teaches us that skills picked up in one context do transfer to another. When students produce real journalism read by real readers, abilities accrue and confidence swells.

The Life in Kochi Project

To provide students with a real writing experience, the Life in Kochi website project was begun in 2010. This project was inspired by the *Foxfire* magazine, a student-written quarterly at the Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School in the U.S. state of Georgia, that has been in continuous publication since 1966. Started as an effort to engage a class of students, the magazine was also an attempt to put into practice John Dewey's progressive ideals of using what happens in the classroom for the wider social good (Wigginton, 1985). This project attempts something similar. But while articles for the *Foxfire* magazine began initially as an oral history project, the Life in Kochi website is focused on creating feature-style journalistic articles about local culture and current events in Kochi Prefecture. Given the fact that so little information is available in English about this

prefecture, the website serves a genuine purpose and attracts real readers, both locally and around the world. Though, as teacher, I am the ultimate arbiter of students' classroom grades, the ultimate *readers* of their writing are outside the classroom. This, in turn, shapes everything that happens inside the class. The class is audience-aware, and the articles have to be as interesting and relevant as possible.

All articles are published through lifeinkochi.net which is hosted on a dedicated server running a WordPress installation. Detailed server statistics, and the occasional comment through the site, reveal that student articles are being accessed and read by real people, not just the indexing "bots" of search engines. Views peak at around several hundred in the first few days after publication and announcements on social media. But even though publication happens only once a year, traffic continues to trickle in year round, typically a few dozen per day. Views come from all over the world, but the largest numbers are, perhaps not surprisingly, from the U.S. and Japan. In the past, open commenting has been allowed and responses from visitors have in a few cases elicited exchanges with student writers. In recent years, however, the presence of malicious actors on the web has necessitated closing comments a few days after publication. This is unfortunate since it limits the palpable presence of an audience for the students.

The EPIC Program and CEFR

The Life in Kochi project occurs within a larger intensive semester-long program, EPIC, at Kochi National University. Students in the EPIC program take six classes a week, taught by three native-speaker English teachers. Each teacher runs discrete modules with a variety of different focuses, but the team strives to make sure that students get instruction in the full range of English competencies. To that end, the Japanese localized version of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR-J) is referenced in curricula design. The CEFR is a guideline for language learning and instruction widely used in European countries, and increasingly in Japan as well, that allows educators and learners to describe language ability in terms of what learners can do and how well they can do it. Nagai (2010) has illustrated the value of CEFR as a guiding tool for curriculum planning in higher education EFL contexts like Japan. The CEFR distinguishes three domains of language use (understanding, speaking and writing) and uses a 6-point scale of competencies (from A1 to C2) for each domain and subdomain. Each of these competencies is framed as a "Can Do" statement and helps to clarify what teachers seek in our students' work. In this way, the CEFR emphasizes the communicative needs of learners which, from the perspective of curriculum and actual classroom teaching, keeps the focus on the most useful and attainable outcomes of language learning. The CEFR-J "Can Do" statements have added subdivisions within the A and B competencies (e.g. B1.1, B1.2, B2.1, and B2.2) to represent at a more granular level what Japanese learners can do in each of the three domains. With respect to writing, for the Life in Kochi Project, the target "Can Do" statement reads:

> *I can write reasonably coherent essays and reports using a wide range of vocabulary and complex sentence structures, synthesising information and arguments from a number of sources, provided I know something about the topics. --CEFR Writing B2.1*

This can be contrasted with the “Can Do” statement for B1.2 which is the basic entry point writing level required for acceptance into the EPIC Program:

> *I can write narratives (e.g. travel diaries, personal histories, personal anecdotes) in several paragraphs, following the order of events. I can write personal letters which report recent events in some detail.. --CEFR Writing B1.2*

Making concrete the purposeful communication language goals of the class helps students to understand the rationale of the project and serves to keep classroom activities focused on developing this specific writing competency.

The Feature Article Genre and the “Four Box” Structure

The genre used in the Life in Kochi project is what is known as “feature” article journalism. In contrast to “hard” news - articles that dryly recount events happening in society - feature articles tend to be longer, more personal, and more in-depth. Within the broad range of feature article writing styles, there is a type of article that uses what Douglas McGill, journalism professor and one-time staff reporter for *The New York Times*, has called the “four-box” structure. This is the rhetorical structure the student writers use for the Life in Kochi writing module. A few of the students will have encountered the five-paragraph essay, and the concept of a “rhetorical structure” is introduced by having students begin with a short five-paragraph assignment. McGill’s four-box feature, however, is very different from a five-paragraph essay. Though largely unknown in ESL/EFL composition classes, this structure is ubiquitous in journalism, from newspapers to magazines to even television news programs. It is also something students can learn to recognize with increased exposure and practice. So while understanding the four-box structure is critical for this assignment, it also deepens students’ understanding of the written culture of English, and may help them make sense of authentic written English encountered outside of class.

McGill’s four box article opens with what is sometimes called the “Anecdotal Lede”. Though used for a nonfiction purpose, the lede uses the tight-focus, show-vs-tell techniques of fiction to introduce a broader topic. Typically set in the present progressive tense, it is very much like a camera close-up and shows a person or people in the middle of doing something. The purpose is to catch the reader’s attention and to provide a humanized introduction to the broader news story. This is usually only a couple of paragraphs long and requires on-site student reportage. The next box, the “Nut Graph” or “Cosmic Paragraph”, pulls the metaphoric camera back and reveals succinctly the news value of the story. Functioning somewhat like a thesis statement, this makes clear the “take-away” of the article and provides the wider context for the Anecdotal Lede. Usually just a sentence or two, it is typically the hardest one for students to clarify in their writing. The next box, the “Motley Middle”, contains the quotes, paraphrases, and researched facts and statistics that answer the who, what, when, where, why, and how questions raised by the Nut Graph. This makes up the bulk of the article and comes from students’ interviews and research. The article ends with a “Kicker”, an emotional - as opposed to logical - conclusion of the article that should leave an impression on

the reader. It is typical to end with the most memorable quote or a circling back to the characters in the Lede, and then a redirection towards the future.

As Hyland (2003) points out, a genre-based approach to writing instruction requires a careful explanation of how texts in that genre are structured and why they have that particular structure. For the first few years of the project, early class sessions were spent having students read various examples of this type of article and then, where possible, identifying the hidden structure themselves. Ultimately, this proved too time consuming and often produced more confusion than understanding. As a result, the class now uses as a guide a single, paradigmatic article (*Blind Children Compete in Braille Challenge,* 2006). This article is short enough and easy enough for students to read in fifteen minutes, and the four box rhetorical structure is clear enough to identify so that students can be guided by saying, "Here, exactly like this". A well-worn copy of the article sits on my desk during all student conferencing about their writing.

Finding Stories to Tell

The initial step in the process of producing a feature article is finding an appropriate story to tell. There are two important considerations in this task. First, as these articles are meant to be read by real readers, it is useful for students to first imagine who might read these articles (other than their teacher and classmates) and what might interest them. It is framed this way: "Picture a non-Japanese person, about your age, either in Kochi or abroad, who is interested in learning about Japan. What might such a person not know but like to learn?" The second consideration in finding the right story for this writing project is that all stories be local stories. Local stories are an obvious "beat" for student journalists since they are easy to cover and usually manageable in a short article. But perhaps even more importantly to the Dewey-inspired ethos of the project, writing about local issues, sometimes called "community journalism", is an act of citizenship. While it has long been acknowledged that a free press is key to an informed democracy, this has usually been understood to refer to the traditional, professional press. The rise of the Internet, however, has upended economic models of journalism and resulted in a decades-long decline of local print media. Kaufhold, Valenzuela, & De Zúniga (2010) provide evidence that citizen journalists not only help to fill the gaps left by this collapse, but also inspire increased activism in their audiences. In a similar way, the Life in Kochi site is filling a local media gap in that it is one of the few sources of local news in English, and while many of the articles are arguably more 'boosterism' than news, a few students every year tackle more serious topics that can help the English-speaking non-Japanese resident make better sense of his or her home. For the student writer then, this project is a meaningful act of citizenship in that it requires them to take a critical interest in the community and to try to understand it sufficiently well enough to write about. Harcup (2011) describes this alternative journalism as a way of "reflecting, nurturing and demonstrating what can be identified as active citizenship" (p.15). It is not expected that students will go on to become professional journalists, but it is hoped that they will become and remain active citizens of any community they belong to.

To help students find a story, they are asked early in the semester to think about someone they know personally who is doing something of note. Drawing on personal connections usually produces the easiest

stories to write. But more commonly, students struggle to find something to write about, either because they are from other prefectures and have a limited understanding of the local Kochi scene, or because they are simply not interested in it. And quite unfortunately, many students have not read much news even in Japanese, so terms like “journalism” sometimes need to be unpacked. In groups of four or five, students brainstorm possible stories, and then whittle the list down to topics that seem both interesting to potential readers and manageable in terms of access and timeframe. Each student then is asked to “pitch” a story to the class in the form of a short, informal presentation. Other students listen and are required to ask a question they would like or expect the final story to answer.

This is where the instructor’s work in the role of assignment editor begins, at the “macro” level, before any writing has happened. For reasons of engagement, it is best that students develop their own stories. Students are given initial guidance, referencing the example article repeatedly, but the first and strong preference is for them to find a story on their own. From time to time, a student will have a strong idea from the start, perhaps in the form of a personal connection. Almost always, however, initial ideas are vague or incomplete. The goal then is to try to coax that seed of an idea into a better story. There are cases where students resist a hard, well-intentioned, editorial push, but in an experiential classroom, teachers are obliged to give students the freedom to fail (Joplin, 1981). Though rare, it has happened that a student has failed to write a publishable article. Equally rare are cases where students have produced a significantly better article than initially seemed possible. But what almost always happens in cases where students insist on going ahead with a problematic idea, is that they get one draft completed and then want to change the topic. As a result, it is useful to keep a couple of story ideas in reserve which can be allocated to those students who struggle to come up with something manageable on their own.

Research and Out-of-Class Interviews

Feature articles depend on interesting interviews, and students are required to identify potential interviewees, then setup and conduct the out-of-class interviews on their own. But before any interview occurs, students need to equip themselves with as much background knowledge of the subject as they can find. Working in small groups, each writer brainstorms with other members to see what the group knows, suspects, wonders and, most importantly, does not know about a particular story. From this comes a series of research questions that provide a place for students to begin educating themselves. Once basic research is completed, students develop a series of questions which are then reviewed. It is stressed that these questions may or may not be used in an interview. What questions actually get asked should depend in large part on the flow of the interview.

The window for actual interviews is frustratingly small: the class occurs only one semester a year and the interviews have to happen after students have been oriented to the project, but before any drafting can begin. This unfortunately limits the stories students can write. Students are instructed to get permission in advance to record the interviews and take photographs. They are also encouraged to send follow-up and thank you emails. It is emphasized that students must not be late or take up too much of an interviewee’s time, but

should also take pains to let the interview develop naturally and to not be too wedded to the list of prepared questions. In general, members of the community seem eager to talk to the students and are genuinely happy to be featured on the website. That said, larger institutions, perhaps being more media-savvy, have at times been a bit wary of granting interviews with students, even to the point of requesting to see a finished article before granting permission to publish.

Conferencing Towards a First Draft

It can perhaps be argued that the most practical insight from the process approach to teaching writing is the recognition that genuinely good writing emerges from multiple drafts. Most students will have never experienced the drafting process, and it is absolutely necessary to explain the basic concepts involved and their underlying rationale. It is useful to give a detailed explanation at the beginning of the assignment, and then a brief reminder before each draft is due of what we are doing and why we are doing it. There is a common notion of the drafting process wherein a writer first produces a full rough draft then revises it in subsequent drafts. But because writing in English is such a laborious task for the students, it seems a better use of time and energy to have them draft the key components of the feature article - the lede and the nut - before trying to write a full first "get-it-all-down-in-one-draft." Without at least the makings of a compelling lede, the article will lack human interest and will not be a feature article. Without a clear nut, the story is not news, and the middle section cannot be attempted. At a practical level, the writing process will have come to a halt.

The tight schedule also necessitates somewhat formalized editorial conferences with specific focus on developmental milestones (lede and nut; middle and kicker; grammar, usage and spelling; final galley). The students are expected to produce (and are held accountable) for four drafts that correspond to these milestones. Each draft has a hard due date and students are asked to print out the first three drafts. Not much is marked directly on early drafts themselves. Instead, a printed rubric for each student in each editorial conference is used to record feedback on specific and explicit milestone features. The individual editorial conferences focus on going over the editorial feedback point by point, and making sure students have understood. Given the complexity of the writing assignment, face-to-face conferencing is necessary to catch when students are simply nodding along and pretending to have understood. It is also important to give them sufficient time digest the feedback and evaluate it. But the goal remains to get the next draft underway as quickly as possible, and so each milestone conferencing should happen during the same class period a draft is submitted.

Lede and Nut Conference

This first draft conference is concerned only with these two key elements. Is the Lede present and compelling? Is the Nut clear and significant? This conference is typically the most lengthy as students are often still struggling to grasp the concepts of Lede and Nut, let alone create their own, but it is time well spent. As mentioned above, the Nut is typically the most troublesome. The question, "What is this story about?" usually gets rephrased several times until a writer can answer in a brief sentence or two. This is where the example article

is most heavily referenced. If topic revision is to occur, this is the conference where that should happen. The conference ends with queries about plans for the middle and kicker just to see if the student writer has at least a rough idea about how they will proceed.

Motley Middle and Kicker Conference

This second conference should produce the first full "down" draft. The primary concern is over the sufficiency of quotes and data to explain the who, what, when, where, why and how of the Nut. Is more research or a follow-up interview needed? Are the paraphrase and quote pairings working well? Does the hard data need breaking up with more quotes? The middle section of the article relies on student writers finding real and relevant information, and, as this is hard work, it is necessary to emphasize to students the principle of journalistic integrity. The kicker is also examined and evaluated for impact: does it feel like an ending? Finally, feature article titles need to be eye-catching, and this is the first draft for that. Writers usually go through a few iterations before the final title is decided.

Grammar, Usage and Spelling Conference

In the introduction to the drafting process, it is stressed that significant attention will not be paid to the surface features of the students' writing until the third draft. There are inevitably students who want this sort of feedback during earlier drafts, and they are encouraged to use checking software such as Ginger or the built-in features of Word even though these are imperfect and cumbersome solutions (Daniels & Leslie, 2016). Truscott (1996; 2007) makes a convincing argument against, specifically, grammar correction in L2 writing classes: that in spite of consuming an inordinate amount of time and energy, there is scant evidence that it is of much lasting benefit to an EFL student's acquired grammatical accuracy, and a good deal of evidence that it can be sharply demotivating. However, this copy editing conference is not intended as instruction, but rather as preparation for publication. Moreover, teacher focus on the grammatical, morphological, and lexical features of student writing occurs only after copious attention has been paid to the content of their articles. Given the limited timeframe, it is impractical to deploy an extensive, carefully coded feedback system. Instead, problematic areas are highlighted and returned for small-group peer work to correct. After students have exhausted their own best efforts, explicit corrections are given for particularly problematic sections only. As teacher, my concern is that meaning be clear, but that texts are not appropriated. As editor, I have to resist the temptation to rewrite all of their English. This tension between teacher-editor roles means that some non-standard English inevitably remains in the final versions. How much depends on which role - teacher or editor - is ascendant immediately prior to publication.

"Galley Proof" Conference

Digital versions of stories must be submitted a few days before this conference session can begin. Students will often submit Word versions, and for technical reasons, these files need "scrubbing" through a simple text editor before they are ready to be formatted in html through WordPress. Students also must submit their

"artwork" (photography) along with captions for those photographs. Once the final drafts and artwork are in, draft posts are created in WordPress and then reviewed with students in this final conference. Photos often get moved around during this conference. Major revisions should not occur at this time, but it has happened that a follow-up interview has produced new material and needs to be edited into this nearly complete draft. Students decide individually how they want their byline to read. Students only see their own articles before publication. On the last day of the class, all articles to be published go online, and class members read and comment on each other's articles.

Teacher-Editor Tension

All teachers, and perhaps especially composition teachers, play various roles, including those of "surrogate audience", "co-conspirator", "expert" and "evaluator" (Reid, 1994; Muncie, 2000) Balancing those roles requires care. For this project, those roles are further complicated by the addition of the role of editor. It is obvious that a writing teacher and an editor have discrete, though occasionally, overlapping goals. A writing teacher should be student-focused, aiming for real growth in the student writer but be willing to let that student fail; an editor simply wants good stories. Throughout the semester, those two objectives remain in a state of constant, unresolved tension. For the first few weeks, this is less of an issue. The genre is introduced and instruction focuses on developing the technical skills the student writers need to produce good feature articles: when to quote and when to paraphrase, how to remove oneself from one's reportage, how to write about data, and the many other skills required in this particular genre. But as the drafting process begins, there are moments where these two sets of goals - that of the teacher and that of the editor - can come into conflict. A case in point would be where a student has failed to produce a clear lede and nut. For whatever reason, the creative process is not working. They have been staring at the problem for a while, and have no idea how to proceed. Often there are several possible solutions, and the goal of the teacher should be to lead the writer to his or her own discovery of one through a small shift in perspective. At times, however, this simple shift proves too time consuming and the *editor* reluctantly solves the problem for the writer.

Over time my editorial feedback and conferencing with students has become increasingly intensive and explicit, especially early in the process. Given the unfamiliarity with the genre and the challenge of writing competently in English, many students need, and indeed expect, a substantial amount of what Wood et al. (1976) described as authoritative "scaffolding". Care must be taken here, however. Severino (2006) warns that all writing teachers have conscious or unconscious socio-political assumptions about the act of responding to student writing. We are doing more than simply working with a student's writing, she asserts. We are also taking a political stance towards cultural assimilation and identity. While this strongly argues for a light hand with ESL writing, I remain unsure about whether it is equally applicable in the case of EFL writing. In fact, the cross-cultural aspect of the Life in Kochi writing project actually argues for robust intervention in the writing of these particular EFL students. Teaching students about the culture of Western journalism is a goal of the class. But rather than an attempt to impose Western culture, the editorial process is intended to be experienced as an invitation to explore the world of English more deeply. Additionally, teachers giving robust feedback must be careful that student texts do not get "appropriated" away from them (Ferris, 1997). Muncie

(2000) worries that a teacher's authority to grade an assignment disempowers student writers and leaves them with little choice but to surrender to a teacher's feedback. His concern seems to spring from the conceptualization of writing, even for his EFL students in Japan, as an act of whole-self expression, and it is one that I at least partly share. It is incumbent upon me to give the occasional Japanese student who is inclined to ignore my editorial advice, the utmost freedom to do so. To the extent possible, it is made clear that each student retains ultimate ownership of his or her own writing. But I am also editing for publication and this is exactly the power dynamic that exists in all publishing: accede to the standards of the editor or do not get published. The teacher-editor balance is struck through an agreement that students do not have to publish an article to pass the class. However, to get to a publishable article, one that will have at least some chance of attracting real readers, students need explicit, unambiguous editorial guidance. This is the nettle that must be grasped. Reid (1995) warns against making students guess what the teacher is thinking. She recounts the maddening experience of being lost in an advanced statistics class where the too-clever teacher withheld the answer and instead invited the students to work out the best solution to a problem for themselves. While that may be appropriate in some situations, for *these* students to succeed in *this* task, it is necessary to intervene early, often, and clearly.

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