神戸市外国語大学 学術情報リポジトリ

Whole language in a sophomore writing class

Whole Language in a Sophomore Writing Class

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1. Introduction

Teaching a sophomore writing course gave me a great opportunity to practice my pedagogical philosophy, "whole language." I applied whole language in my writing course because I believe whole language is an effective approach for all language learners. As the whole language advocate, Ken Goodman (1987), argues, language is learned best when the focus is not on learning language but on the meaning being communicated (p.10). My past-year teaching experiences of English taught me that it was true. I was eager to practice it in my writing class.

This article explains how whole language was practiced in a university writing course to guide, support and stimulate student learning. Section 2 provides the background rationale for the whole language approach to language learning. Section 3 identifies my focuses for the course and outlines the projects themselves, with quotes from the students' reflective reports, in which they shared their thoughts about each project and its usefulness to their English learning. Section 4 reflects on the degree of success of each of my original focuses, and Section 5 discusses some limitations of the whole language approach in the university setting. To illustrate the nature of the projects, the appendix contains excerpts from the project booklets, which were the products resulting from what we did inside and outside the classroom.

Teaching is a continuous process which can enhance teachers' growth. Although I am always growing as a professional, it is

delightful to explain what the students and I practiced together in 2004 and 2005.

2. Background theory

Whole language is a pedagogical philosophy and approach to language education that provides learners with opportunities to grow in their language use through meaningful learning events with others in the classroom, including the instructor. Whole language learning occurs in social contexts through active engagement with authentic literacy activities (Edelsky et al., 1991). In this context, the four skills of language — reading, writing, listening and speaking — will be learned most effectively when they are all integrated in a meaningful process rather than taught separately.

Weaver (1992) writes that whole language educators are strongly influenced by the work of cognitive psychologists and learning theorists who emphasize the roles of motivation and social interaction in learning (p.6). The influence of research on language and literacy development in natural settings led her to the following summary of the principles of literacy education:

1. Learners construct meaning for themselves, most readily in contexts where they can actively transact with other people, with books and with objects and materials in the external world. The most significant and enduring learning, particularly of concepts and complex processes, is likely to be that which is constructed by the learner, not imposed from without.

2. When learning is perceived as functional to and purposeful for the learner, it is more likely to endure. That is, the most significant learning derives from that which arouses the interest, meets the needs, and furthers the purposes of the learner in the here and now.

3. In order to engage themselves wholeheartedly in learning, however, learners must be confident that they will be safe from negative repercussions. That is, the environment for learning must be risk-free.

4. Though there are developmental trends among learners, learning is fundamentally idiosyncratic, even chaotic; the nature and course of each individual's learning are unique.

5. Individual learning is promoted by social collaboration: by opportunities to work with others, to brainstorm, to try out ideas and get feedback, to obtain assistance. In short, learning is facilitated by a community of learners. (p.7)

Key phrases from the above five principles, such as "not imposed from without", "risk-free", "social collaboration", and "community of learners", became the fundamental concepts guiding me to create a whole language classroom for the course.

Other core principles upon which I based the course were Heine and Hornstein's premises for applying whole language in university classes (1996, p.181):

* Learning happens best in wholes rather than in disjointed, decontextualized parts.

* Learning happens best when learners perceive and participate in authentic uses of what is being learned.

* Learning happens best when we value and take advantage of the social nature of learning.

* Learning happens best when learners have control over what, when, and how they learn.

* Learning happens best when learners have the opportunity to reflect on their learning.

I thought they were useful in my writing class.

3. My sophomore writing course

Sophomore writing, a year-long course, is one of the requirements of the core curriculum for all students in the English department. To apply whole language in the course, I focused on:

· providing the students with choices in the learning process so they could keep control of their learning; and

· inviting them to be involved in active and interactive ways of

learning through authentic projects so that the social nature of the class would help them gain better writing skills by cultivating their ability to interact with others using English as a tool of communication.

3. 1 Dual objectives and the textbook

My dual objectives for the course were for the students to build basic writing skills by following the textbook, and to utilize and improve their writing skills by participating in group projects.

Chapters 1-4 of the textbook, *"READY TO WRITE MORE: From Paragraph To Essay,"* were completed in the first semester, using half the class time in each session. This well-organized textbook, whose purpose is to teach students how to compose an essay in English, is also useful for integrated learning about writing. It provides students with opportunities to learn about writing not only through writing but also by talking about writing, listening to others talk about writing, and by reading. By reading sample short essays and answering exercise questions, the students learned some different types of writing for different purposes, the organization of a paragraph, and how to choose topic and supporting sentences and create topic sentences.

During a short lecture time in each class session, I explained the differences between English and Japanese writing. Most of the students were familiar with the Japanese writing format, Ki-Sho-Ten-Ketsu: introduction, development, turn, and conclusion. The students' greatest difficulty was to model in their writing what they were learning. For example, they understood theoretically that the topic sentence should come first, but when they attempted to write a paragraph, they often found they had followed the Japanese format and placed the most important sentence at the end.

Following the textbook was a means for the students to interact with the printed page. As a common text, it gave form to small-group learning where they discussed the sample essays and answers to the

exercises. The textbook also offered good material for reading—easy essays with practical exercises, which I advised them to enjoy reading while commuting on public transport.

The remaining eight chapters of the textbook were used for a group project in the second semester, explained later in this report.

3. 2 Description of the projects

Several projects were conducted to improve students' writing skills through interpersonal communication. The main purpose of the projects was for the students to have a sense of being a writer while keeping in mind their audience, the readers with whom their message would be shared. To achieve this purpose, each project (except the first, self-introduction) concluded with publishing a booklet comprising the writing of everyone in the class. The students also wrote reflective reports, which were risk-free personal responses to the projects.

3. 2. 1 Creating a self-introductory page (2004, 2005)

The first project was a self-description. This assignment had two objectives, one for the students and one for the instructor.

The students were expected to create a self-introduction page. This required them not only to describe themselves as a means to practice writing in English, but also to create a page that was nice to look at and read so that their classmates would enjoy reading it while learning about one another. I wrote corrections and suggestions on each student's page for them to review and keep. I also prepared handouts with common mistakes and some suggestions and explained them in class. The students' self-introduction pages were not compiled in a booklet, but I kept them in a file to help me learn more about them and remember their names.
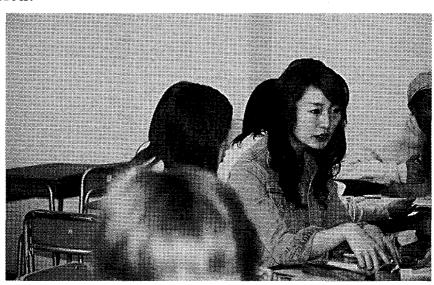
3. 2. 2 Interview project (2004)

The objectives of this project were for each student to get to

know a professor by visiting and interviewing him or her; to enjoy interpersonal communication with a professor; to experience the whole process of a visit to a professor's office, which involved planning questions and using an appropriate manner to make an appointment and a proper register in the conversation; and to get a better understanding of this institute's rich human resources. While it was a group project, each student was required to interview and write about one professor.

Groups of six students chose six professors and each student wrote a two-page report including a photo. In their groups, the students collaborated on the protocol for the interviews and helped each other edit drafts. Each student was to visit a professor with another member of his/her group, so that each student had an opportunity to visit and listen to a second professor and the interviewee and interviewer could be photographed together.

Each week from the third week of April to the beginning of June, 40-50 minutes of the class session was devoted to this project. Each group spent time in discussion, proofreading drafts, or editing. The main writing was done as at-home assignments. In early June an editor team was formed, with one student from each group, to prepare the table of contents and cover page. The students submitted their drafts to me at least twice for checking before preparing the final version.

A booklet with the unique stories of 48 professors was completed in the beginning of July. A sense of accomplishment filled the class and the students talked and laughed as they read the booklet together. A student wrote in her reflective report, "I was impressed when our hard work became a booklet. I felt, 'We did it!'"

Each report included a paragraph for the interviewer's comment, which revealed that many students had a wonderful experience getting to know the professor they visited. The final assignment of the project was to visit the professor again, with a booklet for a gift, and express gratefulness for his or her cooperation

Once the booklet was finished, the project was unexpectedly extended to translating the essays into Japanese. A student had remarked that she wanted to show the booklet to her parents when she went home in summer, but they couldn't read English. Translating the script gave the students another opportunity to reflect on their English writing and to work on the translation with an appropriate Japanese register.

All 48 professors who were contacted agreed to be interviewed and all were very cooperative. The following descriptions are from the students' reflective reports on the project:

- I enjoyed all projects. The most interesting project for me was the interview with Professor A. In this interview, I was able to have a chance to talk and know him well. I enjoyed reading the booklet. I was able to know the professors that I hadn't known before.

- The task needed various spheres of ability, knowledge, and action. It was so hard to write one coherent article. In this project, I began to learn how to complete writing from sentences to one article.

- The interview project was challenging. I learned not only the way of writing but also the way of interviewing.

- I also learned teachers' surprising characters from my classmates' reports in the booklet. From their reports, I got to know some teachers whom I didn't know before and these reports invite me to

think about taking their classes next year.

• Before the activity, I had no business of going to their offices and somehow I felt that professors overwhelmed me, but I found I was wrong after the interview. They were very kind and friendly. They answered all my questions with willingness and told me a lot of interesting things. I enjoyed this activity very much.

• Of course even though it was difficult for me to report my interview to classmates in English, it was interesting too. And it was also exciting for me to read classmates' reports. There was a lot of unknown information about this university's professors and by reading it, I got to know many professors whom I did not know before.

• If it hadn't been for such a project, there would be a distance between professors and us. Now I am so glad that I could feel the professors closer to me than before.

The students' comments showed their mixed feelings about this project—it was hard, but it was interesting to learn about the professors. I hope this project taught the students to more greatly value their attendance at this university.

3. 2. 3 Recipe project (2004, 2005)

Each student introduced a recipe for a favorite dish that was delicious, nutritious, and not too expensive. This writing required the students to list the ingredients and their correct amounts as well as the step-by-step cooking procedure. Knowing that everyone in the class might be trying all the recipes was an incentive for accuracy.

I asked the students to conclude their recipes with a "Chef's comment" explaining their recipe choice. Writing this short paragraph was an opportunity to review the roles of topic and supporting sentences and their differences and to practice using them. While the essays for the interview project became very long and it was time-consuming for the students to check each paragraph's organization, the recipe project involved a different function of language which

required a more precise form that was easier to edit or proofread with each other. Some students showed their gifts for creating an attractive page with illustrations or photos.

As many students lived alone away from their parents, they enjoyed discovering, when they read their friends' recipe pages, that most of them wanted to try cooking. The students and I agreed that this booklet would be good to take when going abroad to study. It could not only help with meals, but also explain a part of our culture.

The students reflected on this project and wrote:

· Another of my favorite activities was "cooking recipe." Just looking at them is fun and cooking them is much more fun! Next time I have a chance to go back to New Zealand, I definitely show the booklet to my host family. (2004)

· Compared the interview project with the recipe project, the recipe project was a little easier than the interview one to me. I had never written anything like this theme. Therefore, I unexpectedly enjoyed writing my recipe and reading other classmates' (2004)

· First I thought it would be an easy project for our class, but it was not. I couldn't make it easily, but I managed to finish it. When I got the book, I thought it was an excellent recipe book. (2004)

· The recipe project was interesting. I can enjoy reading my friends' writing and, moreover, I can enjoy cooking their recommending dishes. The book will remind me of this class and all my friends, no matter how many years go by. It will be kept by us all as a memory. It was fantastic that we could make a book that we can keep in the class. (2005)

· After we finished making that book, we talked about it and we planned to cook and introduce each dish. I think the recipe book became one of our valuable books. (2005)

3. 2. 4. Hometown project (2004)

The class was divided into groups according to the location of

their hometown. The groups discussed the special features of their area and decided which one each student would introduce. The students then wrote descriptions of their hometown areas and how living there had affected them. Most of the students used photos collected from tour catalogs, tourist magazines or the internet to illustrate the highlights to visit or their favorite shops or restaurants. Again, the page designs showed each student's uniqueness, and the projects were compiled in a booklet.

3. 2. 5. Book recommendation and book review (2005)

At the beginning of each class session, I introduced a book which I recommended to the students. They were mostly Japanese books, because I had finished 2004 school year strongly believing that the students needed to read more in order to get ideas for their own writing, improve their brainstorming skills, and have a richer vocabulary.

The students reflected and wrote:

· Your suggestion about books improve my knowledge about English and educated myself outside the classroom.

· The book recommendation was so appreciated for me because I have thought that I must read some books, but I had no idea what kind books would be good to read.

· Although I don't like reading, I have wanted to read some books. You showed us many books and explained why those books were interesting and why reading was important. During this summer I will read one or two books.

Encouraging reading was valuable as an introduction to a new project in the second semester. Each student chose a recent favorite book to introduce to their classmates and wrote one or two pages about it, including a brief plot outline and their reasons for choosing it. This project focused not only on writing, but also on encouraging reading. With their full schedules of assignments and part-time jobs, most students didn't have enough time to enjoy reading. This project

required them to take the time to read at least one entire book or to review a recent favorite. The booklet contained a wide variety of selections which may help the students choose future books at a bookstore or library.

3.3 Guest speakers (2004, 2005)

Many students included in their self-introduction an intention to study abroad in the near future, so I invited several people to talk about their experiences studying abroad. The students practiced note-taking during the presentations and afterwards wrote reports about what they had learned.

In 2004, two professors of this institute and two senior students who had completed the exchange program came to talk about their experiences. The reports on the professors' presentations were submitted to the professors not only to both show them the students' summaries but also to express our appreciation for speaking to our class. The 2004 students also listened to the English lecture of an American professor who had been invited as a guest of the lecture series held by the Teaching English Graduate Program. The lecture was videotaped and students who had difficulty understanding the live lecture watched the video repeatedly before writing their reports.

Here are some students' comments on the lecture assignment from their reflective reports:

- Listening to the lecture, taking notes, and understanding what she said was the most difficult assignment. At the same time, that was the most challenging one, probably because I want to study abroad. (2004)
- It was difficult to listen to the English lecture. Of course it was difficult to write a summary. However, to accomplish this project gave me confidence. So I want to continue this listening project in the next term. (2004)

It was very hard for the students to take notes while trying to concentrate on comprehending the lecture. But this was a good

authentic experience of a classroom lecture in English.

In 2005, a senior student who had just finished the exchange program and an exchange student from the States came to speak to the class. The senior student provided a great deal of information about studying abroad. Many students commented that his talk was powerful and useful, as follows:

- The opportunity to listen to the student who studied abroad was very essential for me. I think that he explained the important information for us. His information taught us the sensible attitude we should have in foreign countries. (2005)

- I was able to hear the story of studying abroad and I came to think of studying abroad seriously. (2005)

- That opportunity was so good a time for us. His story was so exciting and my hope to study abroad became stronger. (2005)

3.4 Use of TV programs (2005)

Several different TV programs were used in the class to improve students' listening comprehension, learning expressions, and familiarization with the media culture of English-speaking countries. The students took notes on lessons on the NHK English program, "Study Abroad on TV," which provided a virtual experience of studying abroad. BBC news reports were used for dictation practice. A cooking program showed the differences in American and Japanese cooking programs and was a good introduction to some basic cooking terms with actions for the recipe book project. Here are some comments.

- By watching cooking TV program, or TV commercials, I was able to understand foreign cultures and customs.

- The TV programs were all in English, and we had to listen carefully. Even now, I watch NHK programs and dramas.

- I learned some colloquial expressions. I keep watching some programs of NHK every week.

- There were many words that I didn't know. I learned a lot of expressions which I can use when I write English sentences. I think

the more expressions we know, the more clear sentences we can write.

3.5 Presentations (2004, 2005)

In the second semester each year, groups of students chose a chapter from the second half of the textbook, which covers different types of essays, and prepared a group presentation for the rest of the class. The presentations were to include a well-organized handout and helpful visual aids. Each group took charge of preparing and presenting a mini-lesson on one type of essay, including writing and practicing their script of the presentation. The students worked hard on both the handouts and visual aids, which were written with marker pens on large sheets of paper and taped to the chalkboard. In 2004, each group presented the lesson twice, to half the class each time, so they could reflect on the first presentation and try to improve it. In 2005, the presentation was videotaped and the class watched the video right after the presentation so everyone could reflect on it.

4. Implications

My main focuses for the practice of whole language in the writing course — choices, authenticity, and interaction — were integrated in each project. I think that all the projects were continuously moving toward a whole because they involved a variety of English-learning skills throughout and concluded with a published product. However, class sessions appeared at times less organized when the groups were involved in their tasks, with different members at different stages of progress.

Here I will briefly reflect on each of my focuses.

4.1 Choices

Most projects provided the students with a choice directly related to their writing: a choice of professor, recipe, topic, book, and textbook chapter. While allowing choice meant more time for

discussion and thought, which caused the less-organized moments, it also gave the students more control and a sense of responsibility for their projects.

However, the students did not have the choice of selecting projects themselves or doing something else. I announced the projects and the students were required to do them. In that sense, from the outset, the class lacked a basic principle of whole language. Limited class time was one reason for this compromise. It would have been much better if the students had spend first several sessions to discuss ideas of projects, brainstorm them to sort out, and select the projects from their list. But I was afraid that it would be too time consuming before they reached the real writing activity. Given the reality of 14 sessions in a semester with a 90-minute class session per week, I decided I would choose the projects and assign them in order for the students to have more time for writing activities.

The other reason for limiting their choice is that I also value the traditional learning style for college students in Japan. While the traditional classroom learning style has many negative effects, it makes it simple for students to organize their learning by assigning them a certain objective to achieve. Although I wanted the students to try a different style of learning, I thought it would be more effective for them to have some guidelines to follow rather than complete freedom to choose everything from the beginning. Even though I chose the projects initially, the students had control and choices at each stage of the process.

4. 2 Authenticity

Each project centered on a real event: meeting a professor, sharing a recipe, introducing a favorite book or a hometown, and listening to guest speakers. The booklets were genuine books anyone would enjoy reading. The following students' comments explain in their own words their sense of involvement in real literacy events which invited them to explore using English purposefully.

· Through many projects, you gave us chances to use (write, read, listen to) English. It was a kind of real language. I am very glad that I had chances to try my English skills in a real situation. (2004)

· The recipe book, everyone introduced easy recipes, so I felt like trying to cook them! (2004)

· Having readers understand the message is not an easy job. It is because writing is one of the methods of communicating with others. (2004)

Even though the possibilities for learning activities are limited by the constraints of the classroom and the institute, the students' comments express both the learning and the enjoyment they gained from these authentic literacy events. I think they enjoyed the writing projects because they were not preparing for an exam, but for real information sharing.

4. 3 Interaction

There were two kinds of interaction in this writing course: interaction among people, and interaction between the writer/reader and the text. To facilitate the students' experience of the classroom as a community of learners (Goodman, 1986), I encouraged them to talk with each other during class sessions. It was different from the traditional way of structuring a writing course, but I believe that more talking produced more opportunities for learning moments for writing. My objective was for the students to create writing as a result of their engagement with the projects and their interaction with one another and with others outside the class.

Interaction with others also provided more opportunities for the students to interact with their ideas and their writing. They talked about their drafts, organized their thoughts, revised their sentences and formatted their writing appropriately for each project. They also interacted with me, not only orally, but also through reading my written corrections and suggestions on their drafts. The following

comments illustrate how the moments of interaction occurred and became moments of learning.

- When I took the booklet to the professor, he expressed appreciation and he spoke well of my report. When I heard that, I became very happy because I didn't have confidence about my report. I really think it was a good experience for me to interview the professor and write about him. (2004)
- As I had an image of "Writing class," I thought it would be a boring class where we would learn only how to improve our writing skills. In this class, however, we had a lot of chances to speak, listen to, read and write English. (2004)
- Through all projects, I found it also important to meet others and listen to what they think before I write about something. (2004)
- Through every class, what pleased me so much is that you corrected my drafts so many times, and gave us so many examples of classmates. (2004)
- Group work was so useful. To broaden our view, it may be better to see another person's sentences. By correcting other sentences in each group, we can learn friends' thoughts and learn various opinions. (2005)

5. Limitations

The students and I certainly learned a great deal practicing whole language in this writing course. As I reflect on my two-year practice, I am also aware of problems with implementing whole language in the course, specifically regarding assessment and time pressure.

Assessment was based on the students' drafts, their subjective self-evaluations, and the records of their attendance. A student (2004) wrote "There is no examination, so what we only have to do is to make effort."

I am not completely sure what this student means. My intention was for the students to work hard and evaluate their efforts by themselves positively. Whole language values self-evaluation, which is uncommon to the school culture in this country, where self-evaluation sounds very informal or unofficial. I haven't found a solution to this contradiction.

Writing is both social and personal. It should be social because there should be readers. This is the reason authenticity was one of my focuses. But writing is also personal. The process of personal progress was not an explicit focus of these projects. Because I purposefully avoided exams or quizzes, monitoring of personal progress was left to the students themselves.

Related to the limitation of assessment is the limitation of managing more than 45 students in a writing course, which left me, as instructor, with a negative sense of incompleteness. The load of correcting drafts was overwhelming, with the result that except for correcting errors, individual progress was not adequately addressed. While rethinking the projects' structure or reducing their scale could solve this limitation, some of the essential elements of whole language might be lost. The practice of whole language will no doubt challenge the educators who try to implement it.

6. A final thought

All of these projects were possible only because of the students'

diligence and the faculty members' thoughtful and kind cooperation. I am very grateful to everyone who was involved with the projects. This course demonstrated that whole lauguage has great potential for this institute.

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An example of the interview project

THE TRUTH ABOUT OUR PRESIDENT

I interviewed Professor Hidehito Higashitani, the President of this university.

He is from Mie prefecture. He graduated from Osaka University of Foreign Studies.

He has two daughters, so he thinks that he is used to speaking to schoolgirls. As he doesn't teach any classes or seminars now, he seldom has opportunities to talk with students. He feels a bit lonely, he explained.

He specializes in Spanish literature. As soon as he graduated from the university, he studied abroad in Spain. He enjoyed his life in Spain very much. It sounded very envious to me.

His wonderful days in Spain are very good memories in his life. He made friends from many different countries. He told me "I think the race is not important in our friendship. I come to like "people" so I make friends with many people." He also said to me "If we can share a sense of humor, we can be friends." He has kept his friendship with people whom he met in Spain. Now his children are friends with his friends' children.

His hobby is to listen to and to sing classical music. Particularly he was absorbed in singing in "Glee club". "Glee club" is a male chorus group. When he was a university student, he was interested in "Negro spirituals" which people from Africa wrote as slaves to escape from their sufferings. He was impressed by the words and rhythms that were unique to African people.

An example of the recipe project
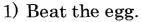
WHIRL CAKES

       1 large size egg
       160 ml milk
       150 g flour
       2 tbsp. sugar
       1 tsp. baking powder
       1/4 tsp. salt

1) Beat the egg.
2) Blend flour, sugar, baking powder and salt in a bowl.
3) Mix the egg and milk together and gradually add to 2).
4) Put 3) into a funnel and fill it. (Be careful to put your finger on the hole!)
5) Heat fat to 190°C.
6) Swirl the batter from the funnel and make it circular, from the center to outward.   Make it about 8 cm in circular.
7) Turn it only once while frying.
8) Fry until its color becomes brown.
9) When it's done, put it on a cooking paper and shift sugar over the cake.
10)   Serve it hot!!

Comment

     I wanted everybody to know this recipe just because IT IS FUN to make it!   Have you ever made a cake or doughnut which shape is like this?? Have you ever had such fun in eating a cake as you can't help but keeping eating even after you're full??   If not, then go to a super market and get ingredients!!   I can tell you that once you started pouring the batter in a circular movement, you cannot stop.

     Now it's your turn to say "It was FUN! I love it!!" I'm waiting for many of you to say that:)