

<Research Article>

## **Writing to Communicate: Exploring the Potential of a Classroom “Community of Practice”**

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### 1. Introduction

The history of English education in Japan includes an official ideological stream which has sought to promote English as a global communication tool alongside a more practical pedagogical stream which has continued to value and reward students who are able to perform well on grammar-based exams. (See Lofsgaard, 2015.) In recent years, though, there has been a gradual narrowing of the gap between the streams and a slow move in the classroom from *learning* English to *using* English. This experimental embrace of communication, however, often seems focused within the domain of oral communication skills despite the fact that Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) emphasizes communication in relation to all language skills.<sup>1</sup>

A focus on communicative listening/speaking skills rather than communicative reading/writing skills is not unreasonable considering that Japanese students are historically weaker in oral communication skills and that daily life communication is more often oral than written (though this has certainly been changing with the rise of email, Social Networking Sites [SNS], and Course Management Systems [CMS]). However if communicative development is almost equated with attention to oral communication, and if writing is presented primarily as practice or as an output exercise designed to demonstrate ability in vocabulary, grammar, and possibly text structure rather than as “a purposeful and communicative activity which responds to other people and other texts” (Hyland, 2011, p. 32), students are unlikely to become good English writers. Writing is not simply printed speech. In order to become proficient in written communication, it is reasonable to suggest that students need to be challenged with writing tasks that are “situated in meaningful contexts with authentic purposes” (Hyland, 2011, p. 32). Students need opportunities to write to communicate.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, MEXT’s “Report on the Future Improvement and Enhancement of English Education” includes the following statements: “In learning English, it is important to develop the mindset to use English actively without being afraid of making mistakes. It is important to conduct language activities where students can actively share their ideas and feelings with each other through speaking and writing at junior high and high schools” (2014, Reform item 2); “In entrance examinations, communication skills in terms of the four language skills need to be evaluated properly” (2014, Reform item 3).

This paper reports on an initial observation study of the role of the learning environment on the nature of writing in a semester-long university writing course. Specifically it explores how efforts to create a community of practice might improve communicative writing.

## 2. Writing in a foreign language

### 2.1 Grammar instruction

When students complain about writing tasks and highlight their weaknesses, they regularly mention that they are poor in grammar. However, Hirvela et al. in the *Handbook of Second and Foreign Language Writing* (2016) conclude that there “is no convincing evidence that either syntactic complexity or grammatical accuracy are the best measures of good writing or of learning to write” and that “an obsessive focus on accuracy may deter [students] from taking risks which move them beyond their current competence” (p. 49). Moreover, according to Hirvela et al. (2016), “many empirical questions still exist on whether the potential effects of feedback (especially in the form of error correction)” are limited to immediate uptake or also impact long-term retention (p. 58). And, as Goldstein (2016) shows in her chapter “Making Use of Teacher Written Feedback,” the issue of the effectiveness of teacher feedback is complex both because of inconsistencies by the teacher and mixed feelings by students (p. 420). Therefore, if teachers want to move students beyond writing and reading tasks in the “encoding and decoding tradition” (Byrnes et al., 2010, p. 27) of a language and help them become better writers, they must develop other pedagogical approaches in addition to grammar instruction and error correction. Grammar is necessary but not sufficient. The neglected topics of writing purpose and learning environment, including writer awareness of audience expectations, may prove to be fruitful areas for teacher reflection and possible explicit instruction.

### 2.2 Writing purpose

According to Reichelt (2001), who reviewed research on foreign language writing (as opposed to English as a Second Language [ESL]) in the United States, foreign language teachers are not in agreement about the purpose of writing in language education. Among the goals mentioned by Reichelt (2001) are “accuracy in orthography and morphology,” reinforcement of vocabulary and grammar, “experience in purposive use of the TL [target language] through interaction and creation of meaning,” or in support of learning of culture, literature, or the other three language skills (p. 579). These purposes may be categorized under the “three complementary orientations” to the study of L2 writing presented in Hirvela et al. (2016): “learning-to-write” (LW), “writing-to-learn-content” (WLC), and “writing-to-learn-language” (WLL) (p. 45). (See also Manchón, 2011a.)

LW has been the most studied perspective and focuses on a range of factors, from personal to social to cognitive, that come into play when writing happens in an L2. Depending on student level and teacher focus, LW may include everything from very basic topics like letter formation and spelling to structural and rhetorical features. Approaches to language teaching that focus on product, process,

and genre fall into the category of LW. (See Hyland, 2011.) The second orientation, WLC, focuses on writing as a way to demonstrate that specific information has been learned. This approach has been developed most in ESL contexts as Content-Based Instruction (CBI) or in multilingual environments, particularly European, as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). Various subjects are taught in a target language, leading to language learning without direct language instruction. (See Hirvela, 2011.) Third, WLL investigates how language learning can happen through the process of writing. This may be similar to the strong version of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which affirms that

language is acquired through communication, so that it is not merely a question of activating an existing but inert knowledge of the language, but of stimulating the development of the language system itself. If the [weak] version could be described as “learning to use” English, the [strong] entails “using English to learn it.” (Howatt, 1984, cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p.86)

Noticing language features through output and interaction may lead to acquisition. (See Manchón, 2011b.) These three views represent different specific targets in writing instruction, but they are not mutually exclusive.

While there is no agreement among teachers about the purpose of writing in language classes, Armstrong (2010) highlights the point that, in real life, “We do not normally write for the purpose of evaluation but for communication” (p. 699) and suggests that providing many chances for students to use language “in order to persuade, inform, describe, and entertain is a valuable endeavor” (p. 700).

### 2.3 Learning environment

This section focuses on exploring the characteristics of an effective learning environment for foreign language writing development. In the context of the following discussion, it should become clear that this model of classroom building ensures that student writers take seriously the expectations of their readers.

Presenting the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), Davies (2005) writes that “people learn more effectively through participation in the activity, rather than by first learning theory, and then having to apply it” (p. 565). Education in Japan in a broad sense, and especially in primary and lower secondary education, may be characterized as more community-making or community-focused than individual-making or individual-focused. Homeroom class identity as well as club and school identities are actively fostered. However, as can be inferred from the current spotlight on active learning, traditional teacher-fronted classrooms have not emphasized participation or practice in academic contexts. Cram schools and entrance exams highlight individuals. While here noting the importance of active learning, defined by MEXT in 2016 with the words “active,” “interactive,” and “deep learning” (See Kamegai & Crocker, 2017.), the following discussion will explore the possibility

of creating an effective classroom learning environment for foreign language writing instruction using the concept of a “community of practice,” an idea articulated by Lave and Wenger in the 1990s and expanded upon by many others.

Davies (2005) cites Wenger’s (1998) three key conditions for the promotion of a community of practice: “1. mutual engagement 2. a joint enterprise 3. a shared repertoire” (p. 560). Although these conditions, explained below, may emerge naturally in a social group over time to form a community of practice, the time limitation, among other factors, in some academic settings makes it necessary for the instructor to deliberately foster these conditions.

The first condition, mutual engagement, basically means interaction. Interaction is not a given in any classroom, but face-to-face interaction can quite easily happen in a classroom if the number of students is reasonable or creatively managed (for example, using groups), and if appropriate activities are integrated into the class by the instructor. Since input, output, and interaction are all recognized to play some role in language learning, mutual engagement should already be a condition that is considered and developed in language classrooms. In addition, the use of SNS and CMS in education can be used to extend mutual engagement beyond the usual number of class minutes per week.

The second point, a joint enterprise, is a common purpose. It is not the goal of a class as articulated by the instructor nor the personal goals each student may have. Rather it is something less tangible and more fluid, something that cannot exist before the group interacts. It is something that is discovered as the group begins to understand itself as a group. As with mutual engagement, a joint enterprise is not a given, but it is possible if the teacher and students are not overly focused on the achievement of individual goals (Davis, 2005, p. 562). Clearly the relative freedom of a university class lends itself better to an open common purpose than an exam-focused secondary system; however a common purpose does not replace other class goals. Perhaps a common purpose can be understood as what emerges from the interaction of individual goals set by group members who are engaged with each other.

Finally, a shared repertoire is “the way of doing” (Davis, 2005, p. 560) that includes linguistic and non-linguistic behavior. It is a store of common expressions, experiences and shared stories that helps determine how the classroom moves, how it sticks together, in its joint enterprise. Planning of classroom time and the use of SNS, CMS, or other resources outside class time can expand the shared repertoire. For example, while in many foreign language writing classes, writing assignments may often be read only by teachers to evaluate students writing ability, the use of CMS would allow for “more frequent and more varied ungraded assignments” (Armstrong, 2010, p. 690) which could become communicative output to be shared with peers. A written record available to all might then lead to a more extensive and deeper shared repertoire.

How to foster mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire in the classroom must be discovered anew in each setting. If successful, though, a community of practice has the

potential to offer the opportunity for apprenticeship (See Gee, 2008.), for “legitimate peripheral participation” that would provide “a safe environment in which to make mistakes, and gradually extend and normalize” linguistic and social practice (Davies, 2005, p. 567). In a foreign language writing class, fostering a community of practice means creating a space where students can become writers together and where they may be motivated to produce truly communicative writing for an audience they have come to know.

### 3. Classroom research

#### 3.1 Research question

A small pilot study was conducted to explore what effects a focus on the learning environment (promotion of a community of practice) might have on student participation in a writing course, as seen in the communicative quality of writing (products) and in observable or reported motivation (process).

#### 3.2 Context overview

This study was conducted in the course of English Communication Writing II that met for 90 minutes once a week for 15 weeks during the 2017 fall semester. Ten students completed the course for credit. Of the ten credited students (referred to as Students A-J), nine were English Education majors (B-J). Seven were male (C, D, E, G, H, I, J) and three were female (A, B, F). At end of the course, students were informed of this research and understood that their data might be used anonymously in this paper.

For the last few years, English (Communication) Writing II<sup>2</sup> has been organized around weekly writing assignments that have alternated between longer journal writing (JW) assignments that have usually been open in terms of topic (although it has sometimes been suggested that JW be used to practice particular types of writing like descriptive or narrative that had been covered in class) and shorter structured writing (SW) assignments that have been written in response to a specific task. For example, after techniques for comparative writing in English have been discussed in class, a specific comparative writing task has been assigned as the SW assignment. Excerpts from Roald Dahl’s *James and the Giant Peach* (1961) have been provided to students in English and Japanese and used as samples of successful writing intended for children.

The specific writing topics covered have included techniques for both creative fiction/nonfiction writing and test writing. While students may be more likely to need academic writing skills than creative ones in the future, they often like creative writing more. In such cases, motivation for creative writing is expected to increase output, resulting in more opportunities for WLL. In addition, writing creatively for a target audience may highlight the importance of purpose and

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<sup>2</sup> From 2013-2016, the course was called 英語ライティング II (English Writing II), but in 2017 it was changed to 英語コミュニケーション・ライティング II (English Communication Writing II).

context awareness and develop skills transferable to academic writing. The course has also included peer reading and instructor feedback (a mix of grammatical-, structural-, content-focused comments).

For the course taught in the fall of 2017, the basic structure from previous years was retained, but some features were added and others were made more specific. The biggest change was the use of Moodle on eALPS. All JW and SW assignments were posted and visible for all members of the class. Previously hard copies of JW had simply been submitted to the instructor for content-focused comments. SW assignments had been peer read in class before being submitted to the instructor for grammatical- and structural-focused comments, but they were not revised. It had been assumed that learning from comments would be seen in future assignments.

The use of eALPS also led to additional writing requirements. First, all students were asked to post content-focused comments to at least two JW posts for each assignment. Content-focused comments were assigned in order to highlight the communicative nature of writing. Comments were visible to all members of the class. Second, students were asked to revise their SW based on the in-class hard-copy comments (both technical and content-focused) they received from their peers and post the revised version. The posted SW received grammatical- and structural-focused comments from the instructor. The class met on Tuesdays, but writing assignments were due on both Tuesdays and Saturdays. Below is an example of the posting schedule:

*Oct. 10 (Tues) Online 300-word JW post due.*  
*[by Oct. 14 (Sat) – 2 content-focused comment posts on classmates' JW]*  
*Oct. 17 (Tues) Hard copy SW assignment due. In-class peer reading.*  
*[by Oct. 21 (Sat) – revised SW assignment posted]*  
*Oct. 24 (Tues) Online 300-word JW post due.*  
*[by Oct. 28 (Sat) – 2 content-focused comment posts on classmates' JW]*  
*Oct. 31 (Tues) Hard copy SW assignment due. In-class peer reading.*  
*[by Nov. 4 (Sat) – revised SW assignment posted]*

Other details were made more explicit. Previously the JW assignment was described as “about two pages,” but the word count feature on eALPS made it easy to enforce a clear 300-word minimum. (As in the past, the SW did not have a word limit but was often described as a paragraph.) In addition, although in past classes JW evaluation had also been based on on-time completion of a writing of appropriate length, the use of eALPS provided a clear record to the individual student and to the class of the ongoing work.

Most importantly, it was emphasized to students at the beginning of the course as well as regularly throughout the course that all assignments, with the exception of test question writing, were

to be completed with their classmates understood as the primary audience. In previous years, this idea had been assumed or perhaps suggested, but it had not been highlighted.

### 3.3 Data collected

The main sources of data for this exploratory study were: the online JW and SW posts, the JW peer comment posts, the final paper, the final test, and an exit questionnaire. There were six JW posts and five SW posts spread out over the semester and the final paper was a 3-page minimum creative fiction or nonfiction piece. The final in-class test consisted of two questions: (1) a TOEFL-like question requiring no particular outside knowledge and (2) a content question (writing techniques) based on an excerpt from *James and the Giant Peach*. The exit questionnaire was 12 short answer questions.

## 4. Observations

### 4.1 Data selection

The presentation of relevant information in this study is difficult. The nature of a writing course in general and the extensive use of posting on eALPS in this course in particular resulted in a large amount of written data which, in different ways, could address the questions about the effect of the learning environment on communicative writing. After considering all of the data, it became clear that some data sources were particularly relevant for discussion about what students wrote while others offered more to a discussion about why they wrote. Accordingly, data from student JW (online posts/post responses) will be presented below under the sub-heading of communicative quality of writing (products); data from responses to the first question on the final exam and from the answers from the exit questionnaire will be discussed under the sub-heading of motivation (process). The focus will be on the character and content of the writing rather than the quantity produced because the amount of output continued stably throughout the semester. There were only 3 missed JW assignments out of 60 (6 assignments x 10 people), and the average number of words ranged from 312 (JW #5) to 358 (JW #6). There were only 3 missed SW assignments out of 50 (5 assignments x 10 people). Everyone completed the final paper and took the final test.

### 4.2 Communicative quality of writing (products)

In this section, attention will be given to student communicative output that may illustrate the presence or growth of a community of practice in that it shows some combination of mutual engagement (interaction), joint enterprise (purpose), and shared repertoire (way of doing, history). The focus is on the final JW, with references to earlier posts when relevant, as these posts address most explicitly student recognition of the communicative nature of writing.

The first example is from Student D. He chose to use JW #2 - JW #6 to write an ongoing story related to his experience in high school baseball (HSB). In his final post, he communicated not only

more information of his high school days, but also his experience of writing as a shared journey. He highlighted his own writing purposes -- teaching and entertaining his classmates.

*I am writing this final journal with feeling lonely because I have enjoyed writing journals. Ending something is a sad thing, but it makes starting something. (I quoted this wording from my journal; HSB Chapter 2.) I will end this series of HSB, and will start a new thing. In the last HSB, I wrote about the beginning of my third year. This week's HSB starts from the last preliminary rounds for the national high school baseball championship. . . .*

*Now, it is over. I finish my HSB. Thank you for your reading. Could you feel fun? Could you learn something? Anything is OK, but I want to tell this; This is not a made-up story. This is a real story. See you again someday. [Student D]*

In response, Student E expressed his admiration for Student D's ability to write about the past and encouraged him to continue. He also responded to the question "Could you feel fun?" by writing that he had enjoyed the stories.

*I am sure that you are a good non-fiction writer. It is not easy to write your past experiences in detail. I do not remember my experiences in my high school clearly. . . . Thank you for your interesting stories. I really enjoyed reading them.*

*Why not write [ JUB: [ ] University Baseball? Some are waiting for your next piece! [Student E]*

In this exchange, there is meaningful interaction, a recognized common purpose of writing for others, and an addition to their shared histories.

Other students approached JW as a series of largely independent pieces, but many viewed the final JW as an obvious time for reflection about writing. Student C shared how his attitude toward writing changed over time. Although he did not address his classmates directly using "you" as Student D did, he had a relevant message for his peers, as is seen in the response it received.

*I was a boy who did not have special interests in writing. When I was an Elementary School student, I did not write my reflections on classes seriously. Sometimes it was just "It was fun today". At that time, I did not feel any enjoyment in Writing. . . . When I was Jr High School student, I wrote more reflections. But at that time, I was not honest to writing. I wrote something that teachers maybe wanted to write. Now I think I should have written my reflections more honestly. When I was High School student, I did not write something. Of course, I used pen and took notes for classes, however, there were few writing opportunities that required my own opinions or thoughts.*

*Until High School, writing did not affect my life at all. After entering [ ] University, my attitude toward writing gradually changed. My writing journey started with my English diary. When I was a freshman, I started to take English diary to improve English writing skill. At that time I was interested in English but was not in writing itself. When I was a sophomore, my diary was started*



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*writing in Japanese, and I knew the fun of writing. And now, I am interested in how to express my opinions or thoughts more clearly in both English and Japanese. I feel really happy when I succeed to put my idea into letters exactly. . . .* [Student C]

For Student C, writing (in Japanese) began as a task to please teachers. As a university student, he began writing in English because he was interested in improving language skills. He started to enjoy writing, first in Japanese and then in English, only after it became communicative, moving a message from the inside out, as this excerpt itself does.

Student E responded by saying he shared the dislike for writing until university. He also mentioned the importance of reading classmates' writing as well as other academic and fiction writing, as it provides new ideas.

*I did not like writing something like an essay until entering the university just like you. I do not know why I did not like writing, but I was not good at expressing myself in writing. After entering the university, I have got a lot of opportunities to write something, especially reports in classes. Through these opportunities, especially writing experiences in this class, I realized that writing is a lot of fun. I feel happy as I can express myself in writing. Also, I like reading my classmates' writing. They give me new ideas.* [Student E]

Student D's response to this post was similar, emphasizing that the course helped him enjoy writing and that reading and writing together make communication.

*I had liked reading, but I had not liked writing. Until having taken this class.*

*To become a good writer, reading is really effective. Since I was an elementary school student, I have enjoyed reading. Because I read many kinds of books since then, I can make many creative scenes or use many fantastic phrases, I think. . . .*

*Recently, you focus on a lyric when you listen to a music, right? If you want to know some fascinating lyrics, please ask me.* [Student D]

The same student responded to another post by Student E by recognizing student writing as possible input for younger university students.

*Your writing that is from your experience has many messages that youngers should read. I want many students to read this writing. When you become a teacher, you should tell your stories to your students.* [Student D]

Among these students, writing was a communicative act, one that built upon what they knew about each other and also reached into the future.

A final example from JW comes from Student F. In her previous JW she chose the topics of books, her job, her hobby, ceremonial kimono, and movies. In each case she presented her opinions

and specifically asked for the opinions of others. In her final post, however, she wrote about her goals, making herself the topic.

*It is the final Jurnal Writing. I have written about many kinds of topics. I did not hit upon today's topic. Then I find the next year is coming soon. It is the time to decide my next year's goal. So I will write about my goal of the next year. . . .*

*These are my goals. The end of every year, I think I cannot achieve my goals. So in the next year, my most important goal is to do my best to realize my goals!!* [Student F]

In response, Student D seems to have recognized the absence of a topic separate from the writer herself. He responded by highlighting the power of expression.

*To make a declaration of your dream might be the thing which needs much courage, but you did it. So, you are a strong woman.*

*Now, I know your next year's dream. So, I can encourage you to make your dream come true. On the other hand, I can rebuke you too when you do not make every effort. Please do your best in the next year. I will do my best with you. Your attitude will be able to cheer your surroundings. I hope that your dream comes true in the next year. In addition, you and your surroundings will be happy.* [Student D]

These examples demonstrate that students engaged in communicative writing and suggest that they may have been encouraged to do so, at least in part, because they were connected in an intentional classroom community where they had come to know their classmates better through interaction and the discernment of shared goals. Student motivation for writing may become clearer in the following discussion.

#### 4.3 Motivation (process)

The second focus, motivation (process), is explored using data from the first question on the final writing exam plus data from the exit questionnaire. The exam question, which was similar to TOEFL questions we had studied, was:

You just found out that you must take one more English writing class to complete the requirements for your course. You can choose a creative writing class, focused on journaling and story-writing, or a class focused on formal writing styles for information-based reports and essays. Which class would you take? Why?

The answers to this question included some practical reasons like needing formal writing styles for graduation papers (Student H), for graduate study (Student A), or for work in a company (Student H), as well as some personal reasons like “I am tired of studying formal writing [sic]” (Student C), but many students also connected their answers to the course. These answers may not reflect students’

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honest feelings since they were written in answer to a hypothetical test question, but many answers seem to suggest that the communicative function of writing is connected to motivation.

Students F, B, and D seem to have generalized from their own experiences and suggested that fun, usefulness, and language ability increase writing motivation. Students F and B wrote that journal writing and creative writing improved motivation. According to Student F:

*Before taking this class, I thought Writing is very difficult and I cannot make good story. If I study writing skill, where could I use that skill? However, in this class, I study many writing stile and I read classmates' writing. Many of them were very funny. I can enjoy reading. Then, I thought I wanted to write enjoyable story like them. Creative writing is good material to raise motivation that student want to write more good story.*

*. . . creative writing is one of the way to express our own opinion and our own character. When I write creative writing, I can use many kinds of expression in English freely. It's good point to write English sentence fun. In other hand, formal writing style, we have to use 'good' expression and 'good' style. . . . It's not enjoyable writing. [Student F]*

And in the words of Student B:

*It's important for us to get 'How to write formal writing,' I think, but I was able to get 'Living words' from making journal and creative writing. Living words mean words like I can use in my daily life and want to use, can have much interest about that. [Student B]*

On the other hand, Student D asserted that while creativity does affect motivation positively, improving confidence by improving skill is also very important.

*I think that people who are short of 'English skill' like me don't have much confidence because they must be afraid of making mistakes in their English. To increase positive motivation of theirs and mine, I want to take the class to get much "English skill." Of course, I think that creative writing is also good in "motivation" because it requires us to just enjoy writing. [Student D]*

Student D linked the class focused on formal writing styles to improvement of English skills and, as a result, motivation. Although English skills can surely be developed in creative writing class, Student D's comment suggests that teachers should address the difficult question of how to integrate skill assessment into a course as a way to encourage students by showing them their progress.

In addition to the indirect insight from the test question answers, more direct answers on the exit questionnaire provided interesting data on motivation. While students noted that the use of eALPS was positive from the points of view of convenience and environmental friendliness, they also emphasized that the use of eALPS affected their level of participation. One student wrote, "The assignments on eALPS was sometimes hard for me, but it helped me to keep thinking something, using English and enjoying it. I think that was good!" (Student D). Another (Student E) noted that the Tuesday, Saturday schedule made possible by eALPS was a good routine. Some responses highlighted

writing itself, but more focused on the effect of being read. The clearest response pointing to this effect was from Student E. He wrote:

*The use of eALPS made me work harder because everyone could look at my post. So, I was trying to do my best and write things interesting to my readers.* [Student E]

Several other responses showed that students felt good when there were many comments on their posts, though nobody wrote directly that he or she tried hard to write well in order to receive many comments. Student G wrote, “I could get feedback from my classmates. It was fun.” Another wrote, “I felt happy when readers understood me. Most of them wrote comments about the contents rather than my writing style. It was good for me” (Student E). However one student, Student I, commented that he would have liked more grammar and expression feedback on the JW.

Interestingly, however, more reading-related responses to questions about the use of eALPS seemed to be from the perspective of being a reader rather than of being read. Student F wrote clearly, “Reading is a good way to study writing skill.” Student H admitted to often not reading others’ posts, but Student E said that he took reading seriously. He wrote,

*I often read everyone’s journal posts and I thought that there were some journal posts on which I did not know how to make comments. It took more time that I had expected to write comments. I think this was because I had to understand what they expressed first and then add my thoughts to it. I enjoyed reading others’ posts.* [Student E]

Benefits of eALPS noted by other students ranged from simply “Checking other students’ post was fun” (Student I) to “We could and can check what we wrote. Sometimes stole, no, borrowed good expressions” (Student I) to getting “inspired” (Student C). These comments suggest that reading in a writing class may help build a shared linguistic repertoire that has the potential to improve form and content in writing output.

Student responses to the final exam question about a future writing course and to the direct questions on the exit questionnaire show that opportunities to be read and to read, like those provided by eALPS, may have increased student motivation for writing.

## 5. Conclusion

This small pilot study suggests that, in a classroom setting, a focus on the learning environment, including the use of online resources, in order to make the communicative purpose of writing clearer and in order to develop motivation to write is worth investigating further.

In its original design, this course tried to balance clearly defined assignments which were evaluated according to particular target points with freer, ungraded (but compulsory) assignments. The intended balance may be compared to alternating accuracy and fluency activities in an oral communication class or may be understood in terms of a balance between assignments highlighting a learning-to-write (LW) approach and those providing opportunities for writing-to-learn language

(WLL). During this study, the quantitative balance of SW and JW assignments was maintained, but the addition of JW student comments led to an unintended emphasis on the JW assignments. In previous years, the reading of JW was limited to the instructor in order to save class time and also as a way to allow students freedom to write about anything in new ways without worrying about sharing it with classmates. This study suggests, though, that the posting of JW not only resulted in more shared language but also was likely a significant factor in creating more shared experiences, which may have contributed to a stronger classroom identity and to an accompanying increase in motivation.

Nevertheless, the original idea of a balance between JW and SW may need to be revisited. While many students indicated on the exit questionnaire that they did learn from in-class peer reading and from the more technical comments on their SW, others wrote that they wanted more emphasis on accuracy. Although online instructor comments to each student were available to all, thereby providing access to additional accuracy-focused input, few students were committed to reading them. It is clear that there was no concrete motivation to do so. Future studies should be designed to observe the effect of language-focused peer comments and instructor comments on the writing skills and motivation of students. Students evaluated the experience of peer reading positively, but it was not possible to see specifically how it impacted their writing. Asking students to post both first draft and revised SW and/or requiring students to read all instructor comments and identify specific strengths and weaknesses they share with other students may help the course to regain the intended balance between SW and JW.

Finally, this exploration of how the fostering of a classroom community of practice might enhance student writing supports the reasonable expectation that self-reflection and interaction is likely to lead to deep learning. When students write about what they care about and write for people they know, they are likely to discover something new about themselves. In this sense, they are writing-to-learn-content (WLC); they are the subject matter, the content of their own writing. While good English is surely important for the future of some of the students, experience and confidence in self-expression should be a central goal of the education of all students. It seems fitting to conclude with a quote from Student B which is imperfect and perfect at the same time: “At first, before taking this class, I do not like writing. I always worry about my grammar, spelling, expression. But after taking this class I like writing. My classmates of course check my grammar, spelling, expression, at the same time, they gave comments to me about my contents. So I become to think ‘Writing’ is not only skill but tool what express us.”

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