

# The effects of written languaging on new essay writing : a qualitative analysis

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## Abstract

According to Swain (2006), providing learners with the opportunity to language about or reflect on their developing linguistic knowledge in the course of L2 learning mediates L2 learning and development. In second language acquisition (SLA) research, languaging (e.g., collaborative dialogue, private speech) has been suggested as playing a crucial role in learning a second language (L2). This study explored the effects of written languaging (i.e., written self-explanations) about written corrective feedback provided on draft essays written by 24 Japanese learners of English. The effect of written languaging was assessed by new essay writing. The effect of written languaging in improving accuracy depended on error types such as articles and conditionals. In this article, I argue that L2 teachers may wish to ask their students to reflect, in diaries, journals, and portfolios, on the linguistic problems they have encountered during classroom activities.

**Key words** : Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (第二言語習得), Written Languaging (筆記ランゲージング)

## Introduction

When people write, they appear to talk aloud about what should be written even though none one is around them. They often take notes or summarize the main points of lectures or articles. They also keep diaries, journals, and weblogs to record their ideas. Why? The acts of speaking and writing may help people clarify their thinking and remember things that would not otherwise remain in memory. Furthermore, speaking and writing may complete people's thoughts or transform these thoughts into objects for further reflection. Since speaking and writing are so natural for us, we rarely think of the role they play in mediating our cognition.

There are at least three useful research approaches in second language acquisition (SLA) to help us understand the role of speaking and writing in mediating cognition: (a) *private speech*

(see Lantolf & Thorne, 2006 for a review), (b) *collaborative dialogue* (Storch, 2013 for a review), and (c) *languaging* (see Swain, 2006 for a review). Private speech is defined as the intentional use of overt self-directed speech to the self (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Collaborative dialogue is dialogue in which L2 learners are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building (Swain & Lapkin, 1998: p. 102). Although collaborative dialogue is different from private speech, its "talking-it-through" aspect is similar to Lantolf and Thorne's definition of private speech. Therefore, what is referred to as collaborative dialogue may in fact be two individuals appearing to talk to each other, but where at least some of the talk is directed at the self (i.e., an overt manifestation of self-regulation).

Languaging is a broader concept than collaborative dialogue, as the former includes private speech. The concept of languaging has only recently been

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proposed by Swain (2006). Based on sociocultural psychology, she defines languaging as “the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language” (Swain, 2006, p. 98). Languaging has been suggested as playing a crucial role in the learning of L2 grammatical and lexical knowledge (Swain, 2006). The effect of languaging, especially *oral languaging* (e.g., collaborative dialogue, private speech) has been examined in the context of the learning of L2 knowledge domains (Storch, 2013). Despite these findings, there is a lack of research about whether engaging in *written languaging* (e.g., written reflection, written/typed self-explanations, and diaries) contributes to students’ L2 learning (c.f., Ishikawa & Suzuki, 2016; Suzuki, 2012, 2017; Moradian, Miri & Nsab, 2017). This study attempts to fill this gap.

The three-stage writing task (i.e., writing first essay, languaging about feedback, and revising it) is a common procedure in SLA research (e.g., Qi & Lapkin, 2001; Sachs & Polio, 2007; Storch, 2008; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007; Swain & Lapkin, 2002). In this research paradigm, the effect of languaging on first drafts of essays has been primarily measured by analyses of the revised essays (e.g., Suzuki, 2012, 2017). However, new pieces of writing have rarely been used in previous studies. As Truscott (1996) argues, successful incorporation of feedback into revision may simply reflect students’ repetition (i.e., short-term memory) that does not involve any (re-) analysis of L2 knowledge. In this study, I included a new essay writing task to gain some insights about whether languaging affects new writing.

## The study

### Research questions

The study was guided by the following research question: “Does written languaging episodes (WLEs) that Japanese university students of English produce in response to corrective feedback on an essay mediate accuracy improvement as measured by new essay writing?”

### Participants

Student participants were 24 native speakers of Japanese enrolled in an English composition course at a public university in Japan during the spring semester from April to July, 2007. Participants were nine males (37.5%) and 15 females (62.5%). Their ages ranged from 18 to 21 years ( $M = 18.71$ ;  $SD = 1.08$ ). All of them had a high school diploma in Japan. The majority of the learners (83%) started learning English as a foreign language at or after the age of 10. Average years of learning English was 7.91 ( $SD = 2.06$ ). Corrective feedback on students’ writing was provided a native speaker of English who had obtained his MA (TEFL) in England and taught English to Japanese university students in the targeted population at the university for almost 30 years.

### Study Procedure

This study was conducted in their regular classroom as part of the English composition course in the university. The three-week sequence of this research is illustrated in Table 1.

TABLE 1  
Three-week sequence of the study procedure

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3
Write first essay (30 min)	1. Languaging task (30 min) 2. Revise essay (20 min)	Write new essay (30 min)

*Week 1.* Participants were given 30 minutes to write a first essay based on a written prompt. The native English instructor provided written corrective

feedback on incorrect words and phrases. The instructor (a) provided the correct linguistic form or structure above or near the linguistic errors, (b) deleted any unnecessary word/phrase/morpheme, or (c) inserted a missing word/phrase/morpheme.

*Week 2.* After receiving a copy of the first essay with the overt correction, participants received a copy of the first essay with written corrective feedback and then performed a written languaging task in Japanese. They read the languaging prompt (“Why is this linguistic form incorrect/wrong? Why did the instructor give feedback on this form? Please write your explanation in Japanese.”) and then explained, in writing on a separate sheet, why their linguistic forms (e.g., grammar, lexis) had been corrected. It took participants 30 minutes to complete the languaging task. After completing learner questionnaires, they received a clean copy of their original essay (i.e., without corrective feedback). Then, they were asked to revise the first essay on a separate sheet of paper in 20 minutes.

*Week 3.* Participants wrote a new essay in 30 minutes based upon a different but comparable written prompt.

### **Writing Prompts**

I counter-balanced two writing prompts for week 1 and 3 across participants to control the order effect of the prompts. These prompts were taken from the ETS web site for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) (<http://www.ets.org/Media/Tests/TOEFL/pdf/989563wt.pdf>). Prompt A is “if you could travel back in time to meet a famous person from history, what person would you like to meet? Use specific reasons and examples to support your choice.” Prompt B is “if you could meet a famous entertainer or athlete, who would that be, and why? Use specific reasons and examples to support your choice.”

### **Analysis**

I qualitatively analyzed whether written

languaging mediated accuracy improvement of two grammatical forms (i.e., articles, conditionals) as demonstrated in the new essay. These two grammatical forms were targeted because (a) both written prompts were expected to elicit similar linguistic errors, and (b) the prompts were not likely to affect the use of the English article system. It was thus possible to examine the incorporation into the new essay of the linguistic items that had been verbalized.

### **Results**

Example 1 shows a representative case where students who had made past hypothetical conditional errors during the first essay successfully incorporated the verbalized items into the new essay in the third week (this trend is true for 15 students). Student #11 wrote, “If I can meet a famous person ...” for the first essay and received overt correction on the use of the auxiliary verb (can → could). The student then explained, in writing, “In the case of past hypothetical conditional, it is appropriate to use *could* instead of *can*.” Then, the student made a successful revision on the item. A week later, the student successfully incorporated that item into the new essay in the following two sentences : (a) If I could meet famous someone...and (b) If I could meet her, I would like to talk to her. Note that the student #11 did not use *can* to describe the past hypothetical conditional sentence in the new essay.

Example 1 : Fully incorporated (student #11)

First essay with over correction :

If I ~~can~~ meet a famous person...

could

Written languaging episode :

In the case of a past hypothetical conditional, it is appropriate to use *could* instead of *can*.

Revised essay : If I could meet a famous person...

New essay : (a) If I could meet famous someone...

(b) If I could meet her, I would like to talk to her.

Example 2 shows a contrary case where students who had made the past hypothetical conditional errors in the first essay failed to incorporate the verbalized items into the new essay (this trend holds true for 2 students). Student #8 wrote, “If I can meet someone...I don't want to meet such person” for the first essay and received overt correction on the use of the auxiliary verb (don't want → wouldn't like). The student then explained, in writing, “I should have used past tense instead of present tense”. Then, the student made a successful revision on the item. A week later, the student failed to incorporate that item into the new essay in the following two sentences : (a) If I could, I want to go to their concert around 1970 and (b) I don't want to meet Pee at that time...

Example 2 : Not incorporated (student #8)

First essay with overt correction :

If I can...I ~~don't want~~ to meet such person.  
wouldn't like

Written languaging episode :

I should have used past tense instead of present tense.

Revised essay : If I could, I wouldn't want to meet such a person.

New essay : (a) If I could, I want to go to their concert around 1970; and  
(b) I don't want to meet Pee at that time....

Example 3 shows a case where students who had made the past hypothetical conditional errors in the first essay partially incorporated the verbalized items into the new essay (this trend is true for 2 students). Student #19 wrote, “I want to meet Himiko, who was...” for the first essay and received overt correction on the use of the auxiliary verb (wanted → would like). The student then explained, in writing, “In this case, it is more appropriate to use *would like* instead of *want*.” Then, the student made a successful revision on the item. A week

later, the student incorporated that item into the new essay in the sentence (a) “I would like to meet Tabuse Yuta, if I could meet one sports player” and failed to incorporate that item into the following two sentences : (b) I want to be taught lots of techniques by him, if I could meet him and (c) And so, I want to let him to talk to me about his dreams...

Example 3 : partially incorporated (student #19)

First essay with overt correction :

I ~~want~~ to meet Himiko who was...  
would like

Written languaging episode :

In this case, it is more appropriate to use *would like* instead of *want*.

Revised essay : I would like to meet Himiko who was....

New essay : (a) I would like to meet Tabuse Yuta, if I could meet...;  
(b) I want to be taught lots of techniques by him, if I could...;  
(c) And so, I want to let him to talk to me about his dreams...

As can be seen in the examples above, the qualitative analyses of relations between WLEs about the conditional and subsequent use of the same form in the new essay indicate the possible effect of written languaging on new essay writing. However, this does not seem to be true for relations between languaging in response to feedback on the English article system in the first essay and subsequent use of the same form in the new essay.

Eleven out of 24 students made fewer article errors in the new essay than the first essay. Prototypical examples of WLEs they produced include: “We need to put *the* before *Jidai* (= era)”; “I forgot to put *the*”; “I don't know”; “the article *a* was missing”; “When a noun is mentioned for the first time, I should provide *a*, not *the*”; and “*The* is used each time after you mention the same noun.” In contrast, 9 out of 24 students made more

article errors in the new essay than the first essay. Examples of the WLEs these 9 students produced are: “a countable noun needs an article”; “an article is needed here”; “I do not need to put *the* before an adverb like *best*”; “I forgot to put an article”; “I should not have provided an article here”; and “I need to put *the* before a noun when I specify it”. Furthermore, 4 out of 24 students produced the same number of article errors in the first and new essays. Examples of the WLEs these 4 students produced include: “An article was missing”; “We need to put *a* before a countable noun”; “To refer to the same noun mentioned before, we need to put a definite article before the noun”; “the noun *world* needs a definite article like the noun *earth* and *sun*”; “I need to put an indefinite article *a*, because I am referring to a person who I want to meet”; and “I don’t know.” As can be seen in these examples, there was not a clear relation between written languaging in response to feedback on the article errors in the first essay and subsequent use of the same form in the new essay.

### **Discussion**

The research question concerned whether WLEs that participants produced in response to corrective feedback on the first essay mediated their accuracy improvement as measured by the new essay. To answer this question, I analyzed whether written languaging mediated accuracy improvement of two grammatical forms (i.e., articles, conditionals) as demonstrated in the new essay. Fifteen out of 19 participants successfully incorporated certain verbalized items (i.e., conditional errors) into the new essay. However, this was not the case for errors in the English article system. In other words, increasing students’ awareness of their article errors in the first essay through written languaging may not have reduced the likelihood of those students making the same errors in the new essay. Therefore, the meditating role of written languaging in improving accuracy measured by the new essay might depend on error types such as articles and conditionals.

This observation is consistent with the assertion that different aspects of grammar may develop in different manners, and instruction may thus have more benefits for some grammatical features than for others (see Ferris, 1999).

One of the reasons for the uneven effects of written languaging on the different grammatical structures is the degree of salience of those two linguistic structures. The English conditional, being the key to the writing task in this study, may have been more likely to be noticed by participants, than the article system for the following three reasons. First, the article system includes multiple functions which are affected by complex factors such as (a) whether a noun is discrete item or mass; (b) what sense the writer has of the reader’s knowledge about the topic (definite vs. indefinite); and (c) whether the context is localized (specific vs. generic) (see Master, 2002). Second, the fact that articles occur frequently in English may have discouraged learners from paying continuous conscious attention to their rule applications in writing (Master, 1997). Third, article errors rarely lead to miscomprehension, leading learners to devote little attention to learning the system (Master, 1997). The conditional is also perceptually more salient than the article system. The higher in communicative value and the more perceptually salient a structure is, the more likely it is to be noticed and learned.

Taken together, the meditating role of written languaging in improving accuracy, as measured by the new essay, may have depended on error types such as articles and conditionals (and their relative difficulty or complexity). That is, written languaging in response to overt corrections in the first essays may have helped learners to use conditionals, but not articles, with greater accuracy in the new essays.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

This study shows that students may deepen their understanding about L2 linguistic knowledge through the act of expressing it in writing (i.e., written

languageing). Pedagogical implications include that L2 teachers may wish to ask their students to reflect, in diaries, journals, and portfolios, on the linguistic problems they have encountered during classroom activities (Suzuki, 2012, 2017). Pedagogical tools such as diaries, journals, and portfolios do not merely provide learners with learning opportunities. What students reflect on in diaries and journals also provides teachers with valuable information: (a) what aspects of language students have paid attention to, (b) students' interpretation of teacher feedback, and (c) overlaps between teacher intent and student interpretation of corrective feedback.

In L2 writing classrooms, teachers may wish to ask individual students to reflect, in writing, on corrective feedback targeting various linguistic problems in their essays. Teachers may be advised to ask individual students to answer open-ended questions like, "what do you think you have learned from feedback on your writing today?" and/or structured questions like, "Why did I give you feedback on this form?" This sort of task can be briefly introduced at the end of each class or be assigned as homework.

There are at least two immediate concerns L2 teachers may have when incorporating languageing activities into their classrooms. The first concern is the use of students' L1 languageing. In this study, I asked students to engage in written language in their L1 (Japanese). This practice may be counter-intuitive with and conflict with many teachers' pedagogical choices to maximize the use of L2 in EFL classrooms. However, considerable sociocultural SLA research shows that the L1 can serve as a cognitive tool to mediate L2 learning (see Swain & Lapkin, 2000). Furthermore, languageing in the L2 may not be productive for limited L2 proficiency learners because it makes large cognitive demands on working memory, which may negatively affect their cognitive processes in the course of learning (Sachs & Polio, 2007).

The second concern is the potentially undesired

direction of learning caused by languageing. Students sometimes learn and consolidate grammatical and lexical knowledge using accounts that are unsystematic, incomplete, and erroneous. Therefore, teachers may need to provide feedback on the accuracy of the content of their languageing. However, it is also true that languageing, either accurate or inaccurate, represents learning processes (Suzuki, 2012, 2017; Swain, 2006). Despite these two concerns, I believe that teachers might find it beneficial to give their learners opportunities to engage in languageing about the target language.

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